

The Spiritual Life

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CHAPTER 5



Self-Denial

We have considered the characteristics of the spiritual life, its sources, and how it is produced in a person. Next we must consider how it manifests itself outwardly. What are its fruits? The root principle of the spiritual life is faith, and all the activities of a spiritual person (i.e., one who is in Christ) can be referred back to faith as the fountain from which they perpetually flow. But this unified life expresses itself in different areas, different kinds of activities. It is extraordinarily useful to meditate on the different parts and distinct duties of the spiritual life. According to our great Teacher, the spiritual life has at heart three principal duties and parts: self-denial, cross-bearing (endurance/patience), and following Christ. We will deal with the first of these in this chapter and the other two in following chapters.

Let me note in passing, however, that patience involves a humble and thoughtful submission to God amid adversities, and following Christ refers to that devotion to Him that involves the intense desire to acquire every virtue and to perfect holiness of life in imitation of Christ Jesus, the most perfect exemplar of every virtue. As He said, “If anyone wants to come after Me [that is, to hear Me and be My disciple], let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me” (Matt. 16:24). These marvelous words sketch out the entire discipline of the Christian life, and a person’s progress should be measured in accordance with this canon and rule. The person who stirs himself up to observe these duties lives “according to the Spirit” and deserves to be called a true Christian, a disciple and follower of Christ Jesus. He has a share in His grace, His unction, and His light. The person who has no

experience of these exercises is a Christian in name alone. He should be reckoned as still in the state of death rather than life. He has no share in the kingdom or economy of the Son of God. Let us now consider self-denial, the first and foremost of these things, in detail.

Self-denial is when a Christian willingly renounces all his sins and vices, everything that flows from the fountain of his old corrupt nature, through a serious and sincere repentance. But not only this, self-denial is the virtue by which the believer is willing to lay aside even the helps and comforts of this life, any good thing whatsoever, if it is in the interests of the glory of God of Christ Jesus. He esteems everything as lesser in value than communion with God. And he is willing if necessary to part with his riches, honors, prerogatives, connections, and even temporal life itself. He subordinates all things to the value of fellowship with God and pleasing Him. And so he uses all external goods, whose use is permitted by the divine law, with such moderation of soul and affection that it is obvious his highest happiness does not consist in things that have to do with this temporary life.

From the definition of self-denial that I have given, this virtue involves three distinct but interrelated things. The first part of self-denial consists in renouncing all the vices of the corrupt nature of every sort, a duty absolutely demanded of every disciple of Christ Jesus. The second part of self-denial is to renounce anything delightful to the flesh—including all innocent and permissible pleasures and even life itself, which is so dear to each of us—if the glory of Christ Jesus, the advancement of the gospel, or the interests of the kingdom of God demand it of us. The third and final part of self-denial is to make use of the temporal goods whose enjoyment is permitted by the law of Christ with such moderation of our affections that it is manifest that they do not constitute our highest happiness. The use and enjoyment of good things is always to be subordinated to the control of sanctified reason. These are the three aspects of self-denial.

In my definition, self-denial has a broader meaning than repentance and involves a number of other matters. The virtue of repentance is described in Scripture by a variety of terms, including turning, returning to one's self, or having a change of mind (cf. Jer. 31:17; Mark 1:15). In repentance, a believer in communion with God (or the person who,

encouraged by the word of the gospel, aspires to that communion) renounces all vices whatsoever. He abstains from his sins connected to the corrupt nature since he is convicted of their ugliness, indecency, and noxious consequences. He detests, hates, and distances himself from his sins with a sincere and constant desire to be changed. He embraces a better form of life, completely opposed to the first. Out of love for God he seeks diligently all the opposite virtues and is led by the Holy Spirit to seek to glorify Christ and to edify his neighbor. Such repentance from vices and pursuit of virtue is to “depart from evil, and do good” (Ps. 34:14; cf. Isa. 1:16–17). The two activities can never be separated from each other, but the idea of repentance most directly refers to the first part: that is, abstaining from vices. Since we cannot properly understand this virtue unless we are acquainted with the vices, let us spend a few pages discussing these faults from which we must repent.

It is difficult even to enumerate the vices that are the object of repentance, since the weeds flourish in so many fields and arise in so many fecund varieties, and each seems to have its own numerous subspecies of sins and crimes. Among them are impiety, atheism, profaneness, hypocrisy, superstition, injustice, malice, selfish ambition, pride, greed, intemperance, hatred, envy, false speech, disobedience to parents and superiors, cruelty, inhumanity, vanity, immmodesty, self-love, rash judgments, excessive chattering, and the inordinate desire for the honors, comforts, and advantages of this world. These are almost random examples to which innumerable others could be added.

Everyone who has studied ethics recognizes that the numerous types of vices can be traced to chief or root vices. The ancients held four cardinal virtues: prudence, fortitude, justice, and temperance. And they understood the opposing cardinal vices to be imprudence, laziness (faintheartedness), injustice, and self-indulgence. Their approach and method for understanding virtues and vices is parallel. But not everyone organized the species or the number in the same way. John Cassian [ca. 360–435] listed eight capital vices, and John Wycliffe [ca. 1325–1384] (an outstanding man of his time whose memory I wish to honor here) lists seven capital vices and the same number of virtues. They are (each with its opposite) pride/humility, envy/charity, wrath/patience and meekness, sloth/piety and godliness,

avarice/a regulated attachment to temporal goods, gluttony/abstinence, and luxury (self-indulgence)/chastity.

Here are my thoughts on the matter: the apostle Paul refers all kinds of vices to two classes—impiety and worldly lust. He says that “because the grace of the gospel has appeared to all men, they must deny ungodliness and worldly lusts and live temperately, justly, and piously in this present age” (Titus 2:11–12). He wisely traces all vices back to these two categories. Injustice, malice, idolatry, superstition, profaneness, and irreverence for holy things are species of impiety. And all other faults can be traced back to lust—that is, an immoderate and overweening affection and desire toward some carnal thing: a person’s unregulated longing for something either within himself or outside himself. This is a very nicely made division of the material. But to get a little wider view of the cardinal vices and to understand them more distinctly (without disturbing the apostolic order!), I will discuss five: impiety, malice, injustice, lust (an inordinate love for oneself and for carnal things), and finally, laziness. Now a few words on each.

Impiety or ungodliness is the vice of irreverence toward God and disrespect toward sacred things. Among a wide variety of faults, impiety includes all idolatry and crass superstition, which are offenses against conscience. The direct offenses of impiety include atheism (the denial of a God whose free providence governs the universe), profane thoughts about God, profanity in words, denial of God’s providential care toward humankind, lying under oath, and any other false calling on the divine name in the profession or exercise of religion. The indirect offenses of ungodliness include self-will in the worship of God and a casual and irreligious approach to holy things. It is also an offense to be religious only when it goes well with our own temporal interests (Lev. 26:21, 23–24). Idolatry and superstition are often described as the greatest of all vices (e.g., Deut. 29:18; cf. Psalm 10; Isa. 5:18; Mal. 3:14). Impiety is summarized in the words of the godless: “The LORD will not do good, neither will he do evil” (Zeph. 1:12). Atheism is the worst and most serious of all vices. It is an offense against the clear light of reason and in effect changes light into darkness and darkness into light, and, as the prophet says, “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness” (Isa. 5:20).

Connected to impiety, malice is that vice by which a person is inclined to harm those he should help. It proceeds from the fountain of his corrupt nature and inborn depravity. It leads a person to rejoice when things go bad for others and to take pleasure when they have trouble, even if it results in no personal benefit (see 1 Peter 2:1; Rom. 1:29; Col. 3:8). The effect of this fault is “to do harm” (Mark 3:4). The nature of this vice is perfectly described in Jeremiah 11:15: “When you do evil [i.e., when you harm another], you exult with joy.” This vice surely comes from a corrupted nature by which a man wills his neighbor evil, and if he has the ability and opportunity will work for his detriment and do him evil, even if he gains nothing by it. This vice also involves the tendency to judge one’s neighbor in the worst possible light, to interpret his words and deeds perversely, to flay him with slanders, to peck away with jokes at his expense, and if possible, to oppress and destroy him. This is what the prophet calls slaying or killing with the tongue (Jer. 18:18). This vice proceeds from the deep depravity and inborn corruption in fallen human beings. Malice so infects the hearts of some that they want good to happen to no one other than themselves. This stems from envy, which is the most common form of malice (described by the Lord in John 8:44). This vice is so nasty, base, deformed, shameful, and so contrary to the upright nature created in human beings that indeed it points to the image of Satan. For this reason, he is called “the evil/malicious one.” Malice deforms man as the image of God and turns his affections in a direction completely opposite the nature of God. God is not only just, upright, pure, and holy, but also good, generous, and patient to all His creatures. Without having any obligation to do so and without regard to His own utility, He treats them liberally with largesse and does them good out of His great kindness. We see in malice all the contrary qualities.

Injustice applies to similarly broad areas of life. Some divide the discussion of injustice and its corresponding virtue, justice, into questions of exchange, commerce, and the business of human society; questions of how social leaders should dispense honors and privileges impartially in accordance with the merits of each one; and questions about each person exercising proper liberality toward others. But justice and injustice always boil down to the same foundational question.

Injustice is the vice of denying others their due, while justice is the virtue of rendering to others what is proper to them. By “what is due to a person,” I mean that which is owed to him in accordance with reason; equity; the laws of human society; the covenants, conventions, and particular considerations that have a place among men; and the merits of each person in particular. In society, each member has something that he regards as particularly his own and that does not belong to another: something he loves as his own and that he disposes of at his pleasure alone. Each person has his honor, his dignity, and his reputation. He has the exclusive right to something—for example, his goods or his pay. What is his and what is another’s is prescribed and defined by law, reason, and the mutual respect that men owe to each other, founded on justice, law, and the contracts established among them.

Whoever therefore denies to another what rightfully belongs to him commits the sin that we call injustice (1 Cor. 6:9). No matter what motive leads a person to commit injustice (whether malice, hatred, envy, lust, the longing to steal others’ goods, or some other inner depravity), it is a most repulsive fault. Though it comes in an infinite number of forms (beyond the limits of this short work to even sketch out), the worst and most shameful injustice is when judges pervert the law and defraud the innocent of their rights. This happens when those in power ingeniously devise exceptions to the most certain and clear principles of law, or when they focus on terminology and neglect the substance of a matter. In such a way they oppress others and condemn them unjustly. Injustice is a vice so serious and so detested by God (but so dominant at times in ancient Israel) that the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Micah strongly cried out against it in their day (see Isa. 10:1; Amos 2:7–8; Mic. 3:9–11).

Lust I place fourth in the list of capital vices. Lust, according to the Holy Scriptures, refers either to a forbidden love for something that is falsely considered good or to the excessive love for truly good things. This root vice is a large tree with many branches. Following the division of the apostle in 1 John 2:16, we will consider “the lust of the eyes” (i.e., greed, the excessive and immoderate desire to acquire and possess the wealth and riches of this world), “the lust of the flesh” (i.e., overindulgence in the pleasures of the palate and of the body:

sexual impurity and wantonness, homosexuality, and carnal vices that I do not intend to review), and finally “the pride of life” (i.e., selfish ambition). Sinful ambition is the excessive desire for the honors that distinguish the conditions of men in this life as well as the pride, arrogance, and external display with which people occupy the higher positions in society. This vice is extremely common in the human race and indeed ruins it, as Peter suggests: destruction and mischief are in the world by lust (2 Peter 1:4).

All the other vices we have reviewed come from the corrupt and twisted nature that all men have in common from birth, but they manifest themselves in various degrees. We would not say that all men are equally unjust, malicious, or ungodly, although the seeds of all these corruptions exist in them all. It is the different kinds of lust active in people that makes the difference. All humans are born in slavery to lust and the carnal affections that drag our wills toward the love of false goods. We are all “flesh” in this servitude to desires for fleshly, external, and visible goods. We are all pushed about by carnal affections for things that please the senses: pleasures of the belly and of the body, worldly delights, comforts, beauty, health, strength, honors, and a high reputation. But it is false to put perishable good in the place of true goods that are eternal. Communion with God in Christ is where we find our true riches. This is the *summum bonum* that constitutes our true security. To love as our *summum bonum* anything inferior to the true highest good of fellowship with God is to lust after something false. Whatever a man loves, esteems, and prefers (whether in himself or in the world) above and before communion with God is a counterfeit and adulterated good.

Now the love of oneself is instinctual to all. God put in us the instinct for self-preservation, and it is a virtue rather than a vice to love oneself in a proper manner. What is forbidden is “self-love,” which is the excessive desire and affection toward those things that have to do with our visible and external condition. The vice is to love one’s person and one’s possessions (things that have to do with the external state of man) excessively, to pursue them with too great a love and to make these inferior goods one’s *summum bonum*. No other sin is more common or more fertile in giving birth to others than this vice of lust. Lust

is the “sin which doth so easily beset us” (Heb. 12:1), as is recognized by everyone except the one who is ignorant of his own heart.

Among the root vices, I give the fifth and final place to sloth or laziness. At first glance it seems to be a type of lust—that is, the excessive desire for the comforts and pleasures of this life. But sloth is a very common vice with a much wider meaning. First, sloth leads a person to neglect looking into what is true and what is his duty (and from this comes a culpable ignorance). Second, sloth leads a person to neglect putting his duty into practice or to carry out his duty in a cold or careless fashion. The ancients called this *accidia* (negligence) (Prov. 6:6; 26:13). The Lord mentions this in Matthew 25:26 as does the apostle Paul in his epistles to the Thessalonians and to Titus. Laziness is the opposite of proper diligence and zeal. It is a damaging fault, shameful in a person gifted with excellent faculties for activity and fit for work. It may come from a native indolence or a natural weakness or slowness. It may be instilled by habit, or it may be that other desires have enticed a person and drawn him away from his labor. It spreads itself throughout the entire man—that is, over every duty and exercise to which he is obligated by the law. This is why I have ranked this as one of the chief and root vices.

There are two main varieties of sloth to which the others can be easily referred. The first is neglecting to search for the truth and to understand one’s duty in the matter of religion. The fruit of this carelessness is a culpable ignorance, condemned by the writers of the old and new covenants as the fountain of many errors and much sin. Undoubtedly, many mortals fall into a myriad of offenses that they would avoid if they were not troubled by this fault (Isa. 1:2; Hos. 4:1; Eph. 4:18; 1 Peter 1:14). The second kind is when we neglect or are careless about the public or private duties which we know that God’s law imposes on us, and we give ourselves over to leisure, idleness, or cares that have nothing to do with the glory of God, the edification of our neighbor, or concern for our own legitimate well-being and advancement. This is also called laziness, faintheartedness, weakness, or lack of courage (James 1:4; Rom. 12:11).

Thus far we have been discussing the first part of self-denial: abstaining from, renouncing, and eradicating these chief and root vices

and everything that the corrupt nature brings with it. Now Scripture calls the virtue that enables this self-denial “repentance,” “turning,” “coming to one’s senses,” or “conversion”—that is, switching from vice to virtue, from the world to God, from the power of Satan to Christ, from the darkness to the light (Acts 26:18). If this repentance is holistic, thorough, and such as pleases God (there exists a counterfeit repentance), then it will be accompanied by affection, resolution, and actions. Your affections are involved when you are persuaded of the ugliness, irrationality, and indecency of your vices and the absolutely certain loss and damage that they bring with them, and when you are inflamed with love for the God who made Himself known to you in grace. Your resolution is involved when you purpose and settle in your mind to abstain constantly from every sin. And your actions are involved when you steadily execute this purpose and apply yourself to practicing the opposite virtues.

Jesus calls repentance self-denial. He does this by way of emphasis because the vices we must renounce are so tightly connected to our corrupt nature that they are, as it were, part of ourselves. Christ calls renouncing your sins “plucking out your eyes” and “amputating your feet and hands” (see Matt. 5:29–30; 18:8). How tragic and sad is the condition of sinful humanity! Our inborn nature is full of vice expressing itself in a wide variety of ways. But experience and the witness of our hearts teach us that each person has his favorite vice. Among all the faults stemming from our inner corruption, each of us has a penchant for this or that sin in particular. We can say that this sin does not simply trouble the man but that it inheres to his nature, forming a very part of the man himself. Such vices cannot be taken away except by the power of divine grace. Some people are naturally inclined to deep vices such as ambition, greed, or lust whereas others are slaves to hardness of heart, irritability, anger, or vengeance. These vices are what the Scripture writer calls “the closely-clinging sin” (Heb. 12:1). Each of us feels that when we have to renounce commerce with this sin, we have to renounce our very selves. True enough: when we repent we lose a part of ourselves, but we do it in order to save another part of ourselves.

Now let us discuss a second part of this great virtue of self-denial. Self-denial also consists in laying aside any good thing (something that

can be properly loved and possessed) if the glory of God and of Christ, His kingdom, or the truth of the gospel demands it. This is what the Lord commands in Matthew 10:37 and Luke 14:26. Clearly it is legitimate to own and appreciate certain good things that are beneficial to our human nature. A disciple of Christ Jesus may properly possess and enjoy many things, keeping in mind that these things have to do with our exterior and visible condition and may be separated from our highest good. Among these are riches, honors, a wife or husband, children, parents, privileges attached to birth or social status, and lastly temporal life itself. But it may happen (whether in a time of extraordinary testing by God or in a time of persecution publicly organized against the cause of the truth) that believers have to face the grim choice of either denying themselves these good things that they tenderly love or of denying Christ Jesus, the true faith in Him, or the saving communion with Christ which is founded on that faith. Here, indeed, a believer needs fortitude, persistence, and courage of soul. Here the soldier of Christ Jesus is called to the trial of his virtue. Instructed by the divine will in accordance with the example of the Levites, he must not regard father, mother, children, honors, riches, privileges, or any other good thing of this age if it is the will of God (Deut. 33:9; 1 Peter 3:17). Putting all these things behind him shows the entire world that he prefers the communion of God in Christ Jesus to all other good things and that one must subordinate to Christ every favorable external condition distinct from this highest good. This is the law of the kingdom of Christ with its severe demands: "The one who loves father or mother above Me is not worthy of Me; and the one who loves son or daughter above Me is not worthy of Me" (Matt. 10:37). Do not imagine that this is a new law. It is ancient (cf. Heb. 11:8, 10, 24–25). It is no sin to love such people—we love them naturally because they are ours, making up part of our being as it were. The love is placed in us by natural instinct. For just as we become part of our parents, as it were, so our children become part of us. And furthermore, what can more properly be called "ours" than our own physical life? The one who denies himself these good things is indeed denying himself. This is self-denial indeed.

But there is a third and final aspect of self-denial relevant to us all. Self-denial is a virtue that implies the following: We must manifest in

all the business of our life that we value nothing in the world above our communion with God in Christ. We must love nothing among all the things of this world (food, drink, proper pleasures) so vehemently that, if necessary, we could not separate ourselves from it except with great bitterness of spirit. And we must use all things temperately and under the government of sanctified reason so that it is obvious that we have been freed from slavery to corruption and transported into the state of the liberty of the sons of God (John 8:36; Rom. 8:21–22). The doctrine of the apostle is "that both they that have wives be as though they had none...and they that buy, as though they possessed not; and they that use this world, as not abusing it" (1 Cor. 7:29–31). This is a mark of the perfection of a Christian: to use moderately the good things of this world that have been provided by divine providence—not indulging the flesh in any way but sharing liberally from our goods with others. Additionally, if a believer feels in himself a greater longing and propensity of soul toward this or that permissible good thing than sanctified reason judges to be balanced, then he will abstain from it voluntarily until the vice of lust is conquered and the use of that good thing can be restricted within proper bounds. This, too, means denying oneself since it involves things that we naturally desire and that are considered to be rightfully ours.

CHAPTER 6



Cross-Bearing and Christian Endurance

The life of a man of God involves what we may call spiritual exercises. We have considered the first part of these in our discussion of self-denial. Now we will consider a second part under the rubric of cross-bearing. Cross-bearing is a phrase that our Lord used for emphasis: “If anyone will come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow Me” (Luke 9:23; see also Matt. 10:38; Mark 8:34). The cross was the torturous and shameful punishment used infamously by the Romans and other ancient peoples. And when our Lord speaks of bearing the cross, it refers to the insults, afflictions, adversities, evils, and troubles that human nature greatly abhors because of its instinct for self-preservation. But according to God’s hidden providence, these things are part of God’s plan for the believer and bring him spiritual benefit. New Testament writers speak about “taking up” and “carrying” the cross. These metaphorical expressions are taken from the Roman custom of having the condemned carry the cross on his shoulders to the place of punishment and having his hands tied back onto the cross (see John 19:17; 21:18).

Cross-bearing involves patiently and even joyously bearing the reproaches, troubles, setbacks, injuries, persecutions, afflictions, and all sorts of evil decreed by God to test the faith of believers or to perfect their sanctification (1 Peter 2:15; 3:17). During the early days of Christianity and in accordance with His wisdom, it pleased God to transform His church into a more spiritual form. He detached them from carnal things by means of the reproaches and deep afflictions that He had destined for them to suffer. In this way He circumcised, as it

were, the new people He was forming. God was forming a spiritual nation that in the desert of this world would feed and be nourished only by the celestial manna—a distinct society that would live by faith and hope alone. He is still doing this today. Along with intermittent periods of public persecution, the common miseries and calamities that constantly accompany the human condition in this sad life oblige each of us (some more, some less) to bear and to endure with great patience various evils and to submit ourselves in all things to the will of God in the hope of the future glory.

It is a fact that Christians are not exempt from evils, setbacks, and troubles. But often it seems that God presses His own (who live by faith in Christ) harder and drills them even more rigorously to test their faith and hope and to bring to perfection their sanctification, which consists in the mortification of the flesh. Believers are less attentive to putting the flesh to death while everything is prospering with them. So through the means of suffering, God often purifies and perfects His people by subduing their carnal affections. First Peter 4:1 is worthy of careful consideration: “The one who has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin.”

This virtue of cross-bearing is called endurance in other passages: “If we endure, then we will also reign with him” (2 Tim. 2:12; see also Heb. 10:36). It consists not only in bearing and suffering trouble without grumbling but in taking it up with joy and enduring it gladly. This is implied in the idea of “taking up” your cross. The Romans forced the condemned to bear his cross and forcibly tied his hands to it. But in the spiritual life something more is required of you. When you see the cross that the will of the Lord has destined for you to bear, you must gladly take it on yourself, imitating the example of the Lord Jesus Christ. For no one ceases from sin except the one who has suffered in the flesh (1 Peter 4:1). In this way you will bring glory to God in bearing your cross.

Endurance is a necessary quality for the entire human race. And for the people of Christ, bearing the cross with joy is an outstanding virtue and a true ornament. Such is the character that God loves to see in His people: a godly and calm soul that submits to Him in the most difficult and painful situations of human life with great humility. A

person who never abandons his affection for God, zeal for His glory, or trust placed in God’s grace, even amid great adversities. The grace of Christian endurance preserves your serenity and tranquility of mind in the midst of the stormy seas and keeps you from blurting out any absurdities or murmurings against God. This kind of virtue protects you even as the winds rage and the tempests roar; it is a virtue that almost overcomes the human condition.