

# Self or Christ; Which Is It?

Horatius Bonar  
(1808-1889)

*“For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that He might be Lord both of the dead and the living.”—Romans 14:7-9*

The words “none of us” show that the apostle is speaking of those who have been delivered from a present evil world. He is contrasting them with the men of earth. Once, our life, he means to say, was the same as theirs; now all is changed; and instead of resemblance, there is unlikeness in every feature. He does not count it pride to say, we are unselfish, they are selfish; we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness.

Each of these verses brings out a distinct truth. In the seventh verse we have the setting aside of self; in the eighth, the substitute for self; in the ninth, the way in which this substitution has come about.

1. The setting aside of self. I do not mean annihilating self, as some speak. There is no such thing, save in the dreams of a vain philosophy, or a self-righteous mysticism. I speak of giving self its proper place — the place recognized by our Lord when he said, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” Lawful self-love is not selfishness; yet we may say that selfishness is diseased self-love; and as such, is the master-sin, the master curse of man. He lives for self; his estimate of everything is its bearing upon self; the color which he casts over everything is one derived from self. Self is the horizon which limits all his views. He is not like a man looking round on a noble landscape, and forgetting himself in the beauty of the wide expanse; but he is like a man carrying a mirror with him, into which he is continually looking, that he may see and admire himself; so that every object is seen in connection with self, and is only admired as it helps to set off self. The apostle’s statement presents the reversal of all this. It shows us the mirror broken, into which we looked so complacently; the eye turned outward instead of inward; the horizon thrown back into the far distance, self-forgotten, lost sight of — “None of us liveth to himself, and none of us dieth to himself.” We have done with self, at least, in the way in which we have hitherto been connected with it. It is displaced. It is brought down to its true position and level; it is set aside entirely as an end, or motive; and this, not in one thing, but in everything; for we may take the words, life and death, not merely as expressive of the very things that they mean, but as bringing before us the two extremes of man’s being, and including, of course, everything between these two extremities. This displacement of self, then, is carried through man’s whole being, from one extremity to the other. From his life and from his death, as well as from all between, this self has been displaced.

Now, mark how this process is carried out. The first setting aside of self is in the matter of justification before God; for, previously, self was the main ingredient in man’s theory of justification. His object was to amend self, to improve self, or it might be, to mortify self, in order that thereby he might recommend himself to God. Thus self, in the matter of his justification before God, occupied the chief place. The first thing which the Holy Spirit does, when he convinces a man of sin, is to show that this cannot be; that self can contribute nothing towards his acceptance with God. What is conviction of sin but just the setting aside of self; a negative, but still an important, step; showing a man what cannot justify him before showing him what can. Thus it is, then, in the matter of justification before God, that the setting aside of self begins. From that point it proceeds onwards throughout a man’s whole life. From life, in all its parts and movements, great and small, his inner life, his outer life, his domestic life, his social life, self is

displaced. Life is no longer tinged or shaded, or discolored by self as it had once been. And then the close of his life, in like manner, exhibits the setting aside of self. On a sickbed self is set aside; in dying, self is not allowed to come in. Nor in dying, are we to exhibit self or turn the eye either of ourselves or others to it; or to think merely of enjoyment, or comfort, or reputation among men, our good name, our fame after death — posthumous fame, as men vainly call it. In reference to all these points, self is set aside — “None of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself.” Others may live to themselves, but not we who have been “bought with a price.” Others may die to themselves, but not we who have been “redeemed with the precious blood of Christ.”

How this elevates life! What was that which degraded life? It was the introduction of self. Now, this element of degradation is set aside, and life is lifted up into its true glory—the true position which God originally designed for man. It is no longer the degraded thing that self has made it, but a glorious thing such as God meant it to be.

How this takes away life’s littlenesses! What was it that introduced so much of narrowness into life, into every part of life, and its daily transactions? It was the infusion of self. It was this that made life feeble and little; that shriveled it up, and contracted its original greatness. But now that this element is set aside and expelled, life expands to its true dimensions. Its littlenesses are gone.

How this establishes and strengthens life! What was the element of our weakness? It was self. Yes; self is the great element of weakness, for it disconnects us with the foundation of strength. It cuts us off from God. It isolates and makes us stand alone. But now, when this is set aside, life assumes the strength which God meant it to possess. It is “stablished, strengthened, settled.”

How this secures us against all failure and disappointment! Why was it that we failed so often in our schemes? Because we lived for self. Why was it that we were often disappointed? It was because we were seeking self; but now that this is gone we cannot fail, we cannot be disappointed in anything, for we know that, though our plans and wills are crossed, yet God’s good purpose is carried out, His ends are secured, His will is done. There can be no failure now; no disappointment now; for that which made failure and disappointment necessary and certain has been wholly set aside. Now we go forward as men who feel that, let whatever may come upon us, upon our land, or upon our world, we cannot fail, nor be disappointed. All must succeed, all must be well.

2. The Substitute for self. It is the Lord Jesus Christ who has come into the place of self, filling up its room. In turning from self we do not leave ourselves without an object to live for, or to die for: we get one infinitely more worthy than we possessed before. Instead of self we get the Son of God; the glorious one. He fills us, occupies us, engrosses us henceforth. He is all to us what self was before. He takes the place of self in everything from first to last, great or small. He is the Substitute for self, first of all, in the matter of our standing before God. As the first thing the Holy Spirit does is to set aside self, in the matter of justification and acceptance, so His next is to present to us the Son of God as the true ground of our acceptance. We no longer seek to be justified by self in any sense, or on account of anything done to self; on account of amended self, or improved self; or mortified self, but solely on account of our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us and who rose again. Having taken Him in the place of self, we find ourselves at once accepted of the Father, “accepted in the beloved,” accepted, not because self has been improved, but because self has been set aside and the Son of God substituted in its room. And in this Son of God, whom we take as a substitute for self, in the matter of our acceptance, we find an object worth living for, an object that we can carry through everything, through every part of life, into every region of life. We make Him our Alpha and Omega, our first and our last. On a sickbed our object is, that Christ should be glorified whatever becomes of us. On a deathbed our desire is, that Christ should be magnified, and in all that may happen to our name after death, in anticipation either of good report or of bad report among men, our sole wish is, that the name of Christ should be exalted. Thus, in living and in dying, Christ is all. He has come in the room of self, and fills that room entirely. Our life is thus full of Christ, and so is our death; “Whether we live, we live

unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: so that living or dying we are the Lord's." You are not your own at any time, nor in any circumstances, but His, His only.

What solemnity is thus thrown over life! All its parts, all its movements, are now consecrated to the Lord. Up till the time when this substitution takes place our life is a wasted one, utterly thrown away. It is dedicated to self, just as some of Egypt's magnificent temples of old were consecrated to the worship of some reptile. But now that self has been cast out, and Christ introduced, our life has become a sacred thing; every part of it is consecrated — made "holy unto the Lord."

What dignity this imparts, both to life and death! Let it be the life or death of the poorest, if he be a believing man, a man in Christ Jesus, what a dignity attaches to him; a dignity that attaches to no other being upon earth, not even to its mightiest kings. From the moment that he became a man in Christ Jesus, living not to himself but to Christ, all littleness vanished, all narrowness and meanness were gone, and in the place thereof grandeur, glory, and heavenly magnificence thrown around his person. What a change!

What importance now attaches to life! All triviality has passed out of it. It has now become an important thing either to live or to die. We have got something worth living for, and something worth dying for; and in circumstances such as these, there can be nothing unimportant about life. The end we live for, the end we speak for, the end we act for, raises life up to an importance which nothing else could have done. There can be nothing little now about anything that we think, speak, or do.

What an imperishable character is thus imparted to life! Everything we do, whether in living or in dying, becomes imperishable, now that we live unto the Lord and die unto the Lord. It was self formerly that ruined everything, that made everything connected with us to crumble down and waste away. But now it is entirely different. The Lord has come in to occupy the place of self. He is come in, who is "the same yesterday, today, and forever," and He imparts His immortality to us, in all we are and do. Now nothing dies, but everything lives and that forever, for it is done unto the Lord. Every word spoken for Him has an eternal being. Every action done for Him carries its results forward into eternity; and every step we take, if taken for Him, is a step whose effects are immortal, as is our being, and as is the being of Him who has, by His oneness with us, attached to all we do His own imperishable character.

What an incentive to zeal this gives us! We have now got something to do that is really worth doing; an object worth living for and worth dying for. There is nothing so heartless as to have no object in life, or a poor object; and, on the contrary, there is nothing so quickening, so animating, as to have a worthy object. How mighty, then, must be the impulse, when we can feel that our life is a life to the Lord, that our death is a death to the Lord.

What a reason for consistency and holiness of life! Everything we do tells, not merely upon our comfort, on our earthly prospects, on our good name, but upon the glory of Christ. We have now become so connected with Him that everything we speak or do bears upon Him and His cause. The consistency of a holy life honors Him, and brings a good report of Him to our fellow men. How watchful, then, ought we to be; how jealous over ourselves, lest self should assume the place that belongs only to the Lord; how anxious to adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things; how desirous that our life should be a consistent witness-bearing for Christ that our light should shine before men!

Man out of Christ, I speak to you now. What art thou living for? What has thy past life been? What is thy present life? What are thy ends in living? What is thy hope in dying? The very utmost, I fear, is this — to enjoy present things as much as possible, and to escape hell at last. Have your ideas, your hopes, your aspirings, ever risen beyond these two things? Man out of Christ, what art thou living for? For self! Is that all? What a poor object, what a mean and narrow aim; and what, in such a case, must thy end be but utter disappointment and eternal failure? Man out of Christ, what a poor life must thine be, and what a poor death! What an unmeaning, empty being is thine, and to what a more unmeaning, more empty departure out of it art thou hastening.

And yet how different it might be. Why should not thou, even thou, begin to live unto the Lord? What a rich, noble life might thine become. Instead of a wasted, shriveled, useless, perishable thing, thou mightest have a life filled up for God, and filled up with God; filled up for Christ, filled up with Christ; a life which, though in so far as this world is concerned, may be a life of poverty and obscurity, yet would be, in all other respects, a foretaste of everlasting life, the earnest of the endless glory. And what stands between thee and that life? It is self, the accursed thing. What separates thee from God? It is self, thy love of self, thy admiration of self, thy confidence in self. What is it that stands between thee and the forgiveness of thy sins? It is self; thy confidence in self. What is it that comes between that eye of thine and the vision of the eternal glory? It is self. It is self that is blinding and bewildering thee. What is it that is dragging thee down, and making thee cleave to the dust? It is self. And what is it that will ere long be thine everlasting ruin? It is self. Oh, that thou wouldest begin to make the great substitution of Christ for self. Put Christ where self is, in the matter of thy justification before God, and all is well. Put Christ in the place of self, in regard to the forgiveness of thy sins, and thou art straightway forgiven.

3. The manner in which this substitution is effected —“For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that He might be Lord both of the dead and the living.” Christ’s claim over us as Jehovah is eternal, and nothing can be added to it. As the Eternal Son He has always been Lord both of the dead and living, of heaven, earth, and hell. But His claim over us as the Christ is different from His Lordship over us as Jehovah. His claim over us as the Christ is a superadded claim. It is not something which derogates from, or which neutralizes His former claim; it is simply something added to it. This claim of headship over us He has made good by His death and resurrection. “He died, and rose, and revived.” He received the resurrection-life that He might have a legal claim to Lordship both over the dead and living; so that there might be no part of a man’s being, whether pertaining to his life or his death, over which the Christ might not have the right of Sovereignty. Nor can anyone dispute His claim or present a rival one, for no other has done what He did to secure it. He died and rose again; may He not demand entire Lordship over us in living and in dying? Does not every part of our being thus owe Him allegiance? To whom do we owe homage save to Him? Who has done for us what Christ has done? Has self done the like? Has the flesh done the like? Has the world done the like? Has any angel done the like? Has any fallen man done the like, that we should serve them, and that they should have lordship over any part of our being? No one of these. He alone can ask homage and headship; for He only has the divine and indefeasible right. He has won the dominion, which none can now dispute, by dying and by rising.

Self, then, has no claims upon us, for it has done nothing for us — nothing either for soul or for body. It has been a wall of iron between us and Christ. Is that a reason that we should serve it? It has been a mountain of ice between us and the world to come. Is that a ground of claim over us? Nay, brethren, self has done nothing to make us either live to it or die to it. It never can do anything; shall we then own it; shall we serve it; shall we do it homage?

The Lord has every claim. We have asked, What has self done? We ask on the other hand, What has the Lord not done? What indissoluble, innumerable bonds are there between us and Him, as the living, the dying, and the rising one. He claims to be loved, to be served. Have we satisfied ourselves as to the ground upon which that claim rests? Have we acknowledged it, and is our whole life in every point an acknowledgment of this claim? The whole of our life is to be His, as His life was for us. Surely He has earned this, if He has earned anything at all. The least that we can give Him is our life; the undivided service of our being, in every part; in our doing, in our speaking, in our planning, and in all our daily round of business, so that every part of our life shall be a witness-bearing for Him.

Our death is to be His. In dying He thought on us; so in dying let us think on Him. Our death is to be for His glory. Our last testimony is to be a testimony for Christ. Do we not often, in looking upon deathbeds, forget this? We desire from the dying, satisfaction as to their hope, as to

their peace, but that is all. How rarely do we go beyond that, and remember that there is to be no dying for self, even as there is to be no living for self; and that there is something beyond getting satisfaction of our friend's state, and that something is, that Christ be glorified, that the saint's testimony be not merely as to his own peace, or as to his own prospects, but as to the glory of Him who "died for us, and rose again."

Our eternity is to be His. He ever liveth for us; let us anticipate the ever living for Him. It is not merely that we shall be forever with the Lord; though that is well; but it is that we shall forever glorify Him, forever live to Him. Our whole eternity is to be one of obedience, love, service — all for His glory, for "Christ is all and in all," whether in heaven or on earth. He is so, even here, in some poor measure, to those who have tasted that the Lord is gracious, but in the eternal kingdom He is to be still more fully so. Our life here, and still more our eternity hereafter, are to be for Him. He is the Alpha and Omega of our life here; still more the Alpha and Omega of the life to come.

O man of earth, what is thy eternity to be? If thy life here is life without Christ, is thy eternity to be the same? Think what such an eternity will be to thee. Even if there were no hell, what will be an eternity without Christ? Perhaps thou thinkest little of that; and thou sayest to thyself, "I can do without Christ here, and I shall be able to do without Him hereafter." Nay, my friend, it is not so. Thou canst do without Him here, because thou canst contrive to forget Him — to forget Him in the world, in pleasure, and in business; and this makes thee to do without Him here. But hereafter there shall be no drowning of thy senses in such things as these, so as to prevent the conviction of thy infinite loss. Then the full knowledge of thy loss shall come up before thee, and it will not be a lost heaven merely, a lost kingdom, a lost inheritance, but it will be A LOST CHRIST. That will be the eternal sting; the sense of what thou hast lost in losing Christ. It will be the very bitterness of the cup of gall and wormwood that shall then be given thee to drink. The everlasting sense of what thou hast lost in losing Christ shall be the very sting of the undying worm, and the very torment of the ever-burning fire. ❧