

Christian Self-Denial

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The New Testament claims that the life of Jesus is an example to imitate, a pattern to follow. Often we ignore this claim. When we go to the bank, turn on the television, or even go to church, for example, few of us ask, "What would Jesus do?" When we do not ignore the claim, we find it puzzling. What *would* Jesus have done if he had lived in the twentieth century in America? Would he have a bank account? Would he watch television? Would he be a Presbyterian? A Roman Catholic? An itinerate evangelist? We are puzzled by the claim that the life of Jesus is a pattern to follow, an example to imitate.

Yet the claim is central to the New Testament. In the Gospel of John Jesus says, "I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done" (13:15). Paul states in First Corinthians, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (11:1). First Peter asserts that Christ suffered, "leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (2:21-23). The claim is expressed most forcefully as the requirement of self-denial. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus says, "If any one would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (16:24-25). In the Gospel of Luke, we are to deny ourselves and follow Jesus by taking up our cross *daily* (9:23). Most of us sense that this claim stands at the heart of the Gospel. If we are to follow Jesus and imitate his example, we must learn to deny ourselves. But these are very difficult words, and they are often misinterpreted.

I.

The tradition of self-mortification is one example of how to misconstrue these words. Thomas a Kempis wrote his famous book, *On the Imitation of Christ*, because he believed that to follow Jesus meant to mortify the flesh. He thought that people became "spiritual" when they denied the pleasures of the senses. It has always puzzled me that this book is called a "devotional classic," but there appears to be a continuing market for mortification as is indicated by the continual republication of this fifteenth century volume in shiny paper editions. For him, inward peace is found by resisting fleshly passions. Suffering and grief are good because they protect us from vainglory. Indeed, "the more violence you do to yourself, the greater will be your growth in grace."

This is just wrong. Its dualism of flesh and spirit is wrong. Its masochism is wrong. A Kempis's self-denial becomes a technique to gain God's favor. Whatever self-denial means, it cannot mean that human physical life, bodily existence, should be despised; and it cannot be an egocentric means to acquire virtue.

Yet few of us actually think that we earn God's favor by living a life of

virtue. Even fewer believe that self-mortification is the means toward that end. To be sure, we find ways to castigate the flesh. We smoke, we eat too much, or we neglect our bodies in other ways, though we don't do these things in the name of Christ. What, then, does it mean to say that in following Jesus we must learn to deny ourselves?

II.

Many interpreters believe that the best way to get at self-denial is to formulate it as a moral principle. More often than not, the principle restates the meaning of Christian love; self-denial means love. Following Anders Nygren, the famous Scandinavian theologian, many Protestants have said that self-denial, like Christian love, should be spontaneous and creative. By spontaneous, Nygren meant that Christian love should not be motivated by the worth of the other. Instead, it is unmotivated: it is indiscriminate and indifferent to value; it refuses to discriminate between different values. By creative, Nygren meant that Christian love creates values by imparting love. It does not recognize value, it creates it. Thus self-denial as Christian love is spontaneous and unmotivated; it creatively bestows value. This sounds worthy and lofty: we are to love not because the other deserves it, but simply because the other exists; and we give up ourselves, spontaneously and creatively, by doing so.

The problem is that these definitions are simply not true to human life. A married couple in love, for example, may well exhibit a measure of spontaneity and creativity. But while mutual love may be enhancing to each partner, neither creates the value of the other by bestowing love. Wedded couples are hardly unmotivated, and they certainly wouldn't tell each other that they cannot recognize value or discriminate between values. Imagine a husband saying to his wife, "I love you, but then again, not to discriminate between you and anyone else, I don't recognize any value in you either."

Little wonder that in an effort to be more realistic Reinhold Niebuhr described love as an "impossible possibility." The problem with his definition, however, is its remoteness from life. If love and self-denial are an "impossible possibility," then they furnish little practical guidance, though some motivation may be given. Thus Niebuhr turns to justice to regulate life in the real world.

I am increasingly persuaded that when self-denial is formulated as a moral principle, it inevitably leads to highly questionable moral results. For example, if a twelve-year-old child in good health is asked to donate a kidney to a thirty-five-year-old parent who has just suffered renal failure, we enter very treacherous territory. It is even more treacherous if the child is encouraged to deny himself by donating a kidney out of love. Formulated as a self-contained moral principle, self-denial does not distinguish between submitting to exploitation and serving human need. The distinction is important. There is a difference between serving another and being exploited, but the principle of self-sacrifice alone is blind to it. A sadist who seeks to torture another person should be restrained. Guided solely by the principle of self-sacrifice, however, one does not restrain the sadist but submits to torture and exploitation. Thus

self-sacrifice cannot distinguish between serving human need and submitting to exploitation, and self-denial is incorrectly identified with masochism and irresponsibility. The basic error here is the assumption that self-denial must be formulated as a principle to have moral worth.

III.

The New Testament says that if we are to follow Jesus, we must learn to deny ourselves. This does not mean self-mortification, and it cannot be formulated adequately as a moral principle. So what does it mean? The key is to recognize that self-denial has to do not so much with principles as with persons and their causes. Self-denial is an unavoidable part of ordinary life. We fail to perceive this because the dominant images of our culture distort life as it really is. However, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ truly teaches that "whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

Self-denial, in one form or another, is an unavoidable part of ordinary life because human identity is formed only in the service of a cause. Mundane examples illustrate this fact. If the identity to which you aspire is to become a tight-end for the Minnesota Vikings, then certain interests must be denied. Instead of fooling around all summer, you must go to football camp. Instead of eating anything you want, you must sit at a training table. Instead of watching television in the afternoon, you must practice. Some interests must be denied in the service of a cause.

The same is true of being a student in high school or college. If you aspire to be a student, you must study. Some interests must always be denied in the service of a cause. It is just that simple: God creates human life in such a fashion that to gain identity, we must deny some interests in the service of a cause.

This is true of all of life. Parents gain identity as parents to the extent that family is served. Physicians gain identity as physicians to the extent that health is served. In each instance, service to a cause is the precondition for identity. In each instance, such loyalty is costly to other interests. Self-denial in some form is unavoidable.

But even though a willingness to deny one's self is the precondition for the formation of identity, costly self-sacrifice is not the inevitable result. For this reason, self-sacrifice cannot adequately be formulated as a self-contained moral principle. Whether or not costly sacrifice is called for depends upon whether and when a cause requires it and whether the cause is worthy. The birth of a mongoloid infant may require parental self-sacrifice, but every birth is not this costly. The outbreak of war may demand costly patriotic service, but countries are not always at war. The threat of infectious disease may require a denial of the immediate interests of the physician, but this threat is not always present. Costly sacrifice is demanded only when a cause requires it. The sacrifice is worthwhile only if the cause is worthy.

IV.

Why are these simple truths so obscure to contemporary culture? It is very difficult for twentieth century Americans to find causes and commitments worthy of self-denial and sacrifice. One reason is that the dominant images of our culture misguide. They distort the way things really are. If I had to choose one dominant image for contemporary society, it would be the image of the detached individual who pursues happiness. Our temptation is to think that the good life is found by isolated individuals who seek personal and private satisfaction. For many of us, the good life is something pursued by individuals detached from enduring commitments and isolated from community.

American individualism takes several forms. There is the traditional image of the "self-made man" who is successful by personal effort, apart from community. In today's speech, the image is "looking out for No. 1." There is also the image of "personal self-actualization," devoid of larger commitments. Philip Reiff called this "the triumph of the therapeutic." In today's vernacular, the language is "being your own best friend."

What these and other images have in common is a celebration of emotional detachment. Individuals seek personal and private satisfaction, apart from enduring commitments and isolated from community. These images, of course, do not explain everything about modern life. What is disturbing is how much they do explain. American beer commercials probably express the contemporary vision accurately. Schlitz tells us, "You only go around once in life, so grab all the gusto you can." Anheuser-Busch tells us, "You *can* have it all." So we tell each other, "Go for it."

What is deceitful, false, and untrue, is to think that identity can be gained without commitment to something greater than self. This is a distorted view. God creates us so that life is lost, not gained, unless we attach ourselves to causes. Worthwhile causes require a denial of immediate self-interest. Sometimes they require costly sacrifice.

Once this point is recognized, modern Christians face a peculiar temptation. If we jump in and insist on the need for an isolated commitment to the cause of Christ, detached from the rest of life, we simply reinforce the individualism of our culture. Our temptation is to say that commitment to God and to God alone is what is required. To say this in the twentieth century in America, however, reinforces an already privatized understanding of the Christian life. The God made known in Jesus Christ, to whom we are to respond in faith and obedience, is the one whose dominion extends to all of life, the God who is Lord over all human causes.

To cite but one example, God is sovereign over the political realm. In the thirteenth chapter of Romans, the Apostle Paul tells us that governments are established by God. Political authority is necessary and properly demands respect and honor. The book of Romans insists that governmental power serves the purposes of God. Indeed, God's purposes are present in the political realm even when governments are unaware of them. "There is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (Romans 13:1b). It is not possible to serve God without also serving those proximate human causes—political, economic, and cultural—over which God is sovereign. Even

in a revolutionary situation where one rebels against existing authority, one seeks to relate a proximate political good to God's dominion.

Our Christian vocation is to construe all things under God. Every human cause, every human commitment, every attachment we make in this life—to self, to family, to country—is to be referred to the purposes of God. Christians discern in Jesus Christ the disclosure of God's way with humanity, and humanity's proper way with God. The example of Christ's life is a pattern which denies immediate self-interest by seeking alignment with the divine purposes. To follow the cause of Christ is to conform to this pattern. It is learning to serve those proximate human causes over which God is sovereign.

When we do that, we learn that the need for costly service is a greater part of life than we usually care to acknowledge. The pattern of Christ's life engenders a response to the needs of others. It discloses what is really true about human life: that to gain it, we must lose it. We lose it in a pattern of life which serves God's purposes, and we lose it in a pattern of life which serves those proximate causes which glorify the whole of God's dominion.