

CALVIN ON SELF-DENIAL

Contents

Part One: The Sum of the Christian Life – Self-Denial

The Christian Philosophy of Un-worldliness and Self-Denial

Section 1	We Are Not Our Own Masters, but Belong to God.....	2
Section 2	Self-Denial through Devotion to God.....	2
Section 3	Self-Renunciation according to Titus Chapter 2	3

The Principal of Self-Denial in Our Relations with Our Fellow Men

Section 4	Self-Denial Gives the Right Attitude toward Our Fellow Man	3
Section 5	Self-Renunciation Leads to Helpfulness toward Our Neighbors ...	4
Section 6	Love of Neighbor Looks to God	5
Section 7	Outward Work Is not Sufficient, It Is Intention that Counts!	5

The Principal of Self-Denial in Our Relation to God

Section 8	Self-Denial toward God: Devotion to His Will!	6
Section 9	Trust in God's Blessing Only	6
Section 10	Self-Denial Helps Us Bear Adversity	7

Part Two: Bearing the Cross – A Part of Self-Denial

We Are to Take up Our Cross as Followers of Christ

Section 1	Christ's Cross and Ours.....	8
Section 2	The Cross Leads Us to Perfect Trust in God's Power	8

This Is Needful to Teach Us Patience and Obedience

Section 3	The Cross: We Experience God's Faithfulness and Have Hope....	9
Section 4	The Cross Trains Us to Patience and Obedience.....	9
Section 5	The Cross as Medicine.....	9
Section 6	The Cross as Fatherly Chastisement.....	10

Bearing the Cross in Persecution and Other Calamities

Section 7	Suffering for Righteousness' Sake.....	10
Section 8	Suffering under the Cross, We Find Consolation in God.....	10

The Christian Meets Suffering as Sent by God, but with no Stoic Insensibility

Section 9	The Christian Gives Expression to His Pain and Sorrow.....	11
Section 10	Real Sorrow and Real Patience in Conflict with Each Other	11
Section 11	Patience According to Christian Understanding.....	12

PART ONE: THE SUM OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE— THE DENIAL OF OURSELVES

Sections 1-3 The Christian Philosophy of Unworldliness and Self-Denial: We Are Not Our Own; We Are God's

Section 1 We Are Not Our Own Masters, but Belong to God

Although the Law of God contains a perfect rule of conduct admirably arranged, it has seemed proper to our divine Master to train His people by a more accurate method to the rule that is enjoined in the Law. The leading principle in the method is that it is the duty of believers to present their “bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto God, which is their reasonable service” (Rom 12:1). Hence He draws the exhortation: “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God” (Rom 12:2). The great point then is that we are consecrated and dedicated to God and therefore should not henceforth think, speak, design, or act without a view to His glory. What He hath made sacred cannot, without signal¹ insult to Him, be applied to profane² use.

But if we are not our own but the Lord's (1Co 6:19), it is plain both what error is to be shunned and to what end the actions of our lives ought to be directed.

We are not our own: therefore, neither our own reason nor will is to rule our acts and counsels. We are not our own: therefore, let us not make it our end to seek what may be agreeable to our carnal³ nature. We are not our own: therefore, as far as possible, let us forget ourselves and the things that are ours.

On the other hand, we are God's: let us therefore live and die to Him (Rom 14:8). We are God's: therefore, let His wisdom and will preside over all our actions. We are God's: to Him, then, as the only legitimate end, let every part of our life be directed (Rom 14:8; 1Co 6:19). O, how great the proficiency⁴ of him who, [when] taught that he is not his own, has withdrawn the dominion and government of himself from his own reason that he may give them to God! For as the surest source of destruction to men is to obey themselves, so the only haven of safety is to have no other will, no other wisdom, than to follow the Lord wherever He leads.

Let this then be the first step: to abandon ourselves and devote the whole energy of our minds to the service of God. By service, I mean not only that which consists in verbal obedience, but that by which the mind, divested of its own carnal feelings, implicitly obeys the call of the Spirit of God. This transformation, which Paul calls the *renewing* of the mind (Rom 12:2; Eph 4:23), though it is the first entrance to life, was unknown to all the philosophers. They give the government of man to *reason* alone, thinking that she alone is to be listened to; in short, they assign to her the sole direction of the conduct. But Christian philosophy bids her give place and yield complete submission to the Holy Spirit, so that the man himself no longer lives, but Christ lives and reigns in him (Gal 2:20).

Section 2 Self-Denial through Devotion to God

Hence follows the other principle: that we are not to seek our own but the Lord's will and act with a view to promote His glory. Great is our proficiency when, almost forgetting ourselves—certainly postponing our own reason—we faithfully make it our study to obey God and His commandments. For when Scripture enjoins us to lay aside private regard to ourselves, it not only divests our minds of an excessive longing for wealth, power, or human favor, but also eradicates all ambition and thirst for worldly glory and

¹ **signal** – marked; notable.

² **profane** – common, as distinguished what is sacred.

³ **carnal** – fleshly; sensual, as opposed to spiritual.

⁴ **proficiency** – progress attained.

other more secret pests.⁵ The Christian ought, indeed, to be so trained and disposed as to consider that during his whole life he has to do with God. For this reason, as he will bring all things to the disposal and estimate of God, so he will religiously direct his whole mind to Him. For he who has learned to look to God in everything he does is at the same time diverted from all vain thoughts. This is that self-denial that Christ so strongly enforces on His disciples from the very outset (Mat 16:24), which, as soon as it takes hold of the mind, leaves no place either, first, for pride, show, and ostentation;⁶ or, secondly, for avarice, lust, luxury, effeminacy,⁷ or other vices which are engendered by self love (2Ti 3:2-5). On the contrary, wherever it does not reign, the foulest vices are indulged in without shame. Or if there is some appearance of virtue, it is vitiated⁸ by a depraved⁹ longing for applause. Show me if you can an individual who, unless he has renounced himself in obedience to the Lord's command, is disposed to do good for its own sake. Those who have not so renounced themselves have followed virtue at least for the sake of praise. The philosophers who have contended most strongly that virtue is to be desired on her own account, were so inflated with arrogance as to make it apparent that they sought virtue for no other reason than as a ground for indulging in pride. So far, therefore, is God from being delighted with these hunters after popular applause with their swollen breasts that He declares they have received their reward in this world (Mat 6:2, 5, 16), and that harlots and publicans are nearer the kingdom of heaven than they (Mat 21:31). We have not yet sufficiently explained how great and numerous are the obstacles by which a man is impeded in the pursuit of rectitude,¹⁰ so long as he has not renounced himself. The old saying is true, "There is a world of iniquity treasured up in the human soul." Nor can you find any other remedy for this than to deny yourself, renounce your own reason, and direct your whole mind to the pursuit of those things that the Lord requires of you and that you are to seek only because they are pleasing to Him.

Section 3 Self-Renunciation according to Titus Chapter 2

In another passage, Paul indeed gives a brief but more distinct account of each of the parts of a well-ordered life: "The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearance of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ; who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify to himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works" (Ti 2:11-14). After holding forth the grace of God to animate us, and pave the way for His true worship, he removes the two greatest obstacles that stand in the way: namely, ungodliness, to which we are by nature too prone; and worldly lusts, which are of still greater extent.

Under *ungodliness*, he includes not merely superstition, but everything at variance with the true fear of God. *Worldly lusts* are equivalent to the lusts of the flesh (1Jo 2:16; Eph 2:3; 2Pe 2:18; Gal 5:16). Thus, [Paul] enjoins us, concerning both tables of the Law, to lay aside our own mind and renounce whatever our own reason and will dictate. Then he reduces all the actions of our lives to three branches: sobriety, righteousness, and godliness. *Sobriety* undoubtedly denotes, as well, chastity and temperance as the pure and frugal use of temporal goods and patient endurance of want.¹¹ *Righteousness* comprehends all the duties of equity, in every one his due (Rom 13:7). Next follows *godliness*, which separates us from the pollutions of the world and connects us with God in true holiness. These, when connected together by an indissoluble chain, constitute complete perfection. But as nothing is more difficult than to bid adieu to the will of the flesh, subdue, nay, abjure¹² our lusts, devote ourselves to God and our brethren, and lead an angelic life amid the pollutions of the world.

Paul, to set our minds free from all entanglements, recalls us to the hope of a blessed immortality, justly urging us to contend (1Th 3:5). Because, as Christ has once appeared as our Redeemer, so at His final advent He will give full effect to the salvation obtained by Him. And in this way [Paul] dispels all the allurements that becloud our path and prevent us from aspiring as we ought to heavenly glory. Nay, he tells us that we must be pilgrims in the world; that we may not fail of obtaining the heavenly inheritance.

Sections 4-7

The Principal of Self-Denial in Our Relations with Our Fellow Men

Section 4 Self-Denial Gives Us the Right Attitude toward Our Fellow Man

Moreover, we see by these words that self-denial has respect partly to men and partly (more especially) to God (sec. 8-10). For when Scripture enjoins us in regard to our fellow men, to prefer them in honor to ourselves, and sincerely labor to promote their

⁵ **pests** – plagues, i.e., destructive desires of the soul.

⁶ **ostentation** – display intended to attract notice or admiration; showing off.

⁷ **effeminacy** – having qualities more often associated with women than with men.

⁸ **vitiated** – made ineffective.

⁹ **depraved** – corrupt; wicked.

¹⁰ **rectitude** – uprightness; morality in mind and conduct.

¹¹ **want** – lack.

¹² **abjure** – reject completely.

advantages (Rom 12:10; Phi 2:3), [God] gives us commands that our mind is utterly incapable of obeying until its natural feelings are suppressed. For so blindly do we all rush in the direction of self-love that everyone thinks he has a good reason for exalting himself and despising all others in comparison. If God has bestowed on us something not to be repented of, trusting to it, we immediately become elated;¹³ [we] not only swell, but almost burst with pride. The vices with which we abound we both carefully conceal from others and flatteringly represent to ourselves as minute and trivial, nay, sometimes hug them as virtues. When the same qualities that we admire in ourselves are seen in others, even though they should be superior, we, in order that we may not be forced to yield to them, maliciously lower and carp¹⁴ at them. In like manner, in the case of vices, not contented with severe and keen animadversion,¹⁵ we studiously exaggerate them. Hence the insolence with which each, as if exempted from the common lot, seeks to exalt himself above his neighbor, confidently and proudly despising others, or at least looking down upon them as his inferiors. The poor man yields to the rich, the plebeian¹⁶ to the noble, the servant to the master, the unlearned to the learned, and yet every one inwardly cherishes some idea of his own superiority.

Thus each, flattering himself, sets up a kind of kingdom in his breast. The arrogant, to satisfy themselves, pass censure on the minds and manners of other men; and when contention arises, the full venom is displayed. Many bear about with them some measure of mildness so long as all things go smoothly and lovingly with them; but how few are there who, when stung and irritated, preserve the same tenor¹⁷ of moderation? For this there is no other remedy than to pluck up by the roots those most noxious pests,¹⁸ self-love and love of victory. This the doctrine of Scripture does, for it teaches us to remember that the endowments that God has bestowed upon us are not our own but His free gifts; those who plume¹⁹ themselves upon them betray their ingratitude. “Who maketh thee to differ,” says Paul, “and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? Now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory,²⁰ as if thou hadst not received it?” (1Co 4:7).

Then by a diligent examination of our faults let us keep ourselves humble. Thus, while nothing will remain to swell our pride, there will be much to subdue it. Again, we are enjoined, whenever we behold the gifts of God in others, so to reverence and respect the gifts, as also to honor those in whom they reside. God having been pleased to bestow honor upon them, it would ill become us to deprive them of it. Then we are told to overlook their faults, not indeed to encourage by flattering them, but not because of them to insult those whom we ought to regard with honor and good will. In this way, with regard to all with whom we [deal], our behavior will be not only moderate and modest, but also courteous and friendly. The only way by which you can ever attain to true meekness is to have your heart imbued²¹ with a humble opinion of yourself and respect for others.

Section 5 Self-Renunciation Leads to Proper Helpfulness toward Our Neighbors

How difficult it is to perform the duty of seeking the good of our neighbor (Mat 12:33; Luk 10:29-36)! Unless you leave off all thought of yourself and in a manner cease to be yourself, you will never accomplish it. How can you exhibit those works of charity that Paul describes unless you renounce yourself and become wholly devoted to others? “Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself,²² is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked,” etc. (1Co 13:4-5) Were it the only thing required of us to seek not our own, nature would not have the least power to comply: she so inclines us to love ourselves only, that she will not easily allow us carelessly to pass by ourselves and our own interests that we may watch over the interests of others, nay, spontaneously to yield our own rights and resign them to another. But Scripture, to conduct us to this, reminds us that whatever we obtain from the Lord is granted on the condition of our employing it for the common good of the church. Therefore, the legitimate use of all our gifts is a kind and liberal communication of them with others. There cannot be a surer rule or a stronger exhortation to the observance of it than when we are taught that all the endowments that we possess are divine deposits entrusted to us for the very purpose of being distributed for the good of our neighbor (1Pe 4:10).

But Scripture proceeds still farther when it likens these endowments to the different members of the body (1Co 12:12). No member has its function for itself or applies it for its own private use, but transfers it to its fellow-members. Nor does it derive any other advantage from it than that which it receives in common with the whole body. Thus, whatever the pious²³ man can do, he is bound to do for his brethren, not consulting his own interest in any other way than by striving earnestly for the common edification of the church. Let this, then, be our method of showing good will and kindness: regarding everything that God has bestowed upon us by which we can aid our neighbor, we are His stewards and are bound to give account of our stewardship. Moreover, the only right mode of administration is that which is regulated by *love*. In this way, we shall not only unite the study of our neighbor’s advantage with a regard to our own, but also make the latter subordinate to the former.

¹³ **elated** – proud.

¹⁴ **carp** – find fault in a disagreeable way.

¹⁵ **animadversion** – harsh criticism.

¹⁶ **plebeian** – member of the lower classes.

¹⁷ **tenor** – general character; tone.

¹⁸ **noxious pest** – deadly plagues.

¹⁹ **plume** – to pride, value, or boast.

²⁰ **glory** – boast.

²¹ **imbued** – filled with.

²² **vaunteth not itself** – does not brag.

²³ **pious** – characterized by showing reverence and obedience to God.

And lest we should have omitted to perceive that this is the law for duly administering every gift that we receive from God, He of old applied that law to the minutest expressions of His own kindness. He commanded the first-fruits to be offered to Him as an attestation by the people that it was impious to reap any advantage from goods not previously consecrated to Him (Exo 22:29; 23:19). But if the gifts of God are not sanctified to us until we have with our own hand dedicated them to the Giver, it must be a gross abuse that does not give signs of such dedication. It is in vain to contend that you cannot enrich the Lord by your offerings. Though, as the Psalmist says, “Thou art my Lord: my goodness extendeth not unto thee,” yet you can extend it “to the saints that are in the earth” (Psa 16:2-3). And therefore a comparison is drawn between sacred oblations²⁴ and alms²⁵ as now corresponding to the offerings under the Law (Heb 13:16).

Section 6 Love of Neighbor Is Not Dependent upon Manner of Men but Looks to God

Moreover, that we may not weary in well-doing (Gal 6:9), as would otherwise [immediately] and infallibly be the case, we must add the other quality in the Apostle’s enumeration: “Charity suffereth long, and is kind...is not easily provoked” (1Co 13:4-5). The Lord enjoins us “to do good” (Heb 13:16) to all without exception, though the greater part, if estimated by their own merit, are most unworthy of it. But Scripture subjoins²⁶ a most excellent reason, when it tells us that we are not to look to what men in themselves deserve, but to attend to the image of God, which exists in all and to which we owe all honor and love. But in those who are of the household of faith (Gal 6:10), the same rule is to be more carefully observed, inasmuch as that image is renewed and restored in them by the Spirit of Christ.

Therefore, whoever be the man that is presented to you as needing your assistance, you have no ground for declining to give it to him. Say, “He is a stranger”; the Lord has given him a mark that ought to be familiar to you: for which reason he forbids you to despise your own flesh (Isa 58:7). Say, “He is mean and of no consideration²⁷”; the Lord points him out as one whom He has distinguished by the luster of His own image. Say that you are bound to him by no ties of duty; the Lord has substituted him as it were into His own place that in him you may recognize the many great obligations under which the Lord has [bound] you to Himself. Say that he is unworthy of your least exertion on his account; the image of God, by which he is recommended to you, is worthy of yourself and all your exertions. But if he not only merits no good, but has provoked you by injury and mischief, still this is no good reason why you should not embrace him in love and visit him with offices²⁸ of love (Mat 6:14; 18:35; Luk 17:3). “He has deserved very differently from me,” you will say. But what has the Lord deserved? Whatever injury he has done you, when he enjoins you to forgive him, he certainly means that it should be imputed to himself. In this way only, we attain to what is not to say difficult but altogether against nature: to love those that hate us, render good for evil, and blessing for cursing (Mat 5:44), remembering that we are not to reflect on the wickedness of men, but look to the image of God in them, an image that, covering and obliterating²⁹ their faults, should by its beauty and dignity allure us to love and embrace them.

Section 7 The Outward Work of Love Is Not Sufficient, but It Is Intention that Counts!

We shall thus succeed in mortifying³⁰ ourselves if we fulfill all the duties of charity. Those duties, however, are not fulfilled by the mere discharge of them, though none be omitted, unless it is done from a pure feeling of love. For it may happen that one may perform every one of these offices, in so far as the external act is concerned, and be far from performing them aright. For you see some who would be thought very liberal, and yet [they] accompany everything they give with insult by the haughtiness of their looks or the violence of their words. And to such a calamitous³¹ condition have we come in this unhappy age that the greater part of men almost never gives alms without contumely.³² Such conduct ought not to have been tolerated even among the heathen; but from Christians something more is required than to carry cheerfulness in their looks and [to] give attractiveness to the discharge of their duties by courteous language. First, they should put themselves in the place of him whom they see in need of their assistance and pity his misfortune as if they felt and bore it, so that a feeling of pity and humanity should incline them to assist him just as they would themselves.

He who is thus minded will go and give assistance to his brethren and will not taint his acts with arrogance or upbraiding.³³ [Furthermore, he will not] look down upon the brother to whom he does a kindness, as one who needed his help, or keep him in subjection as under obligation to him, just as we do not insult a diseased member when the rest of the body labors for its recovery, nor think it under special obligation to the other members, because it has required more exertion than it has returned. A communication of offices between members is not regarded as at all gratuitous,³⁴ but rather as the payment of that which being due by the law of nature it were monstrous to deny. For this reason, he who has performed one kind of duty will not think himself thereby

²⁴ **oblations** – anything offered as a sacrifice in worship.

²⁵ **alms** – anything given freely to assist the poor.

²⁶ **subjoins** – adds at the end.

²⁷ **mean...consideration** – contemptible and worthless.

²⁸ **offices** – services.

²⁹ **obliterating** – to reduce to a very low or imperceptible state.

³⁰ **mortifying** – putting to death sinful impulses within.

³¹ **calamitous** – very miserable or distressed; wretched.

³² **contumely** – rudeness or contempt arising from arrogance.

³³ **upbraiding** – rebuking.

³⁴ **gratuitous** – free, voluntary.

discharged, as is usually the case when a rich man, after contributing somewhat of his substance, delegates remaining burdens to others as if he had nothing to do with them. Everyone should rather consider that, however great he is, he owes himself to his neighbors, and that the only limit to his beneficence³⁵ is the failure of his means.³⁶ The extent of these should regulate that of his charity.

Sections 8-10

The Principal of Self-Denial in Our Relation to God

Section 8 Self-Denial toward God: Devotion to His Will!

Let us consider more fully the principal part of self-denial: that which has reference to God. Many things have already been said with regard to it that it is superfluous to repeat. Therefore, it will be sufficient to view it as forming us to equanimity³⁷ and endurance.

First, then, in seeking the convenience or tranquility of the present life, Scripture calls us to resign ourselves and all we have to the disposal of the Lord, to give Him the affections of our heart, that He may tame and subdue them. We have a frenzied desire, an infinite eagerness, to pursue wealth and honor, intrigue for power, accumulate riches, and collect all those frivolities that seem conducive to luxury and splendor. On the other hand, we have a remarkable dread, a remarkable hatred of poverty, mean³⁸ birth, and a humble condition! [We] feel the strongest desire to guard against them. Hence, in regard to those who frame their life after their own counsel, we see how restless they are in mind: how many plans they try, to what fa-tigues they submit, in order that they may gain what avarice or ambition desires, or, on the other hand, escape poverty and meanness.

To avoid similar entanglements, the course that Christian men must follow is this: first, they must not long for, hope for, or think of any kind of prosperity apart from the blessing of God. On it, they must cast themselves and there safely and confidently recline. For, however much the carnal mind may seem sufficient for itself when in the pursuit of honor or wealth, [however much] it depends on its own industry and zeal or is aided by the favor of men, it is certain that all this is nothing, and that neither intellect nor labor will be of the least avail³⁹ except in so far as the Lord prospers both. On the contrary, His blessing alone makes a way through all obstacles and brings everything to a joyful and favorable issue. Secondly, though without this blessing we may be able to acquire some degree of fame and opulence⁴⁰ (as we daily see wicked men loaded with honors and riches), yet since those on whom the curse of God lies do not enjoy the least particle of true happiness, whatever we obtain without His blessing must turn out ill. Surely, men ought not to desire what adds to their misery.

Section 9 Trust in God's Blessing Only

Therefore, if we believe that all prosperous and desirable success depends entirely on the blessing of God; and that when it is wanting, all kinds of misery and calamity await us. It follows that we should not eagerly contend for riches and honors—trusting to our own dexterity and assiduity,⁴¹ or leaning on the favor of men, or confiding in any empty imagination of fortune—but should always have respect to the Lord. Under His auspices,⁴² we may be conducted to whatever lot He has provided for us. First, the result will be that, instead of rushing on regardless of right and wrong by wiles and wicked arts and with injury to our neighbors, to catch at wealth and seize upon honors, we will only follow such fortune as we may enjoy with innocence.

Who can hope for the aid of the divine blessing amid fraud, rapine,⁴³ and other iniquitous⁴⁴ arts? As this blessing attends him only who thinks purely and acts uprightly, so it calls off all who long for it from sinister designs and evil actions. Secondly, a curb will be laid upon us, restraining a too eager desire of becoming rich or an ambitious striving after honor. How can anyone have the effrontery⁴⁵ to expect that God will aid him in accomplishing desires [that are] at variance with His Word? What God with His own lips pronounces cursed, never can be prosecuted with His blessing. Lastly, if our success is not equal to our wish and hope, we shall, however, be kept from impatience and detestation of our condition, whatever it be, knowing that so to feel were to murmur against God, at Whose pleasure riches and poverty, contempt and honors, are dispensed. In short, he who leans on the divine blessing in the way that has been described will not, in the pursuit of those things that men are wont most eagerly to desire, employ

³⁵ **beneficence** – active goodness; charity.

³⁶ **means** – income; resources.

³⁷ **equanimity** – evenness of mind; calm temper in the midst of extremes.

³⁸ **mean** – lowly.

³⁹ **avail** – profit, benefit, advantage toward success.

⁴⁰ **opulence** – wealth as evidenced by luxurious living.

⁴¹ **assiduity** – constancy or diligence.

⁴² **auspices** – guidance and support.

⁴³ **rapine** – robbery.

⁴⁴ **iniquitous** – wicked.

⁴⁵ **effrontery** – shameless boldness.

wicked arts that he knows would avail him nothing. Nor when anything prosperous befalls him will he impute it to himself and his own diligence, industry, or fortune, instead of ascribing it to God as its author. If, while the affairs of others flourish, his make little progress or even retrograde,⁴⁶ he will bear his humble lot with greater equanimity and moderation than any irreligious man does the moderate success that only falls short of what he wished. For he has a solace in which he can rest more tranquilly than at the very summit of wealth or power: he considers that his affairs are ordered by the Lord in the manner most conducive to his salvation. This we see is the way in which David was affected; while he follows God and gives up himself to His guidance, [he] declares, “Neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me. Surely, I have behaved and quieted myself as a child that is weaned of his mother” (Psa 131:1-2).

Section 10 Self-Denial Helps Us Bear Adversity

Nor is it in this respect only that pious minds ought to manifest this tranquility and endurance. It must be extended to all the accidents⁴⁷ to which this present life is liable. He alone, therefore, has properly denied himself who has resigned himself entirely to the Lord, placing all the course of his life entirely at *His* disposal. Happen what may, he whose mind is thus composed will neither deem himself wretched nor murmur against God because of his lot.

How necessary this disposition is will appear, if you consider the many [happenings] to which we are liable. Various diseases ever and anon⁴⁸ attack us: at one time pestilence rages. At another, we are involved in all the calamities of war. Frost and hail, destroying the promise of the year, cause sterility,⁴⁹ which reduces us to penury.⁵⁰ Wife, parents, children, [or] relatives are carried off by death. Our house is destroyed by fire. These are the events that make men curse their life, detest the day of their birth, execrate⁵¹ the light of heaven. [They] even censure⁵² God and, as they are eloquent in blasphemy, charge Him with cruelty and injustice. The believer must also contemplate the mercy and truly paternal indulgence of God in these things. Accordingly, should he see his house by the removal of kindred reduced to solitude, even then, he will not cease to bless the Lord. His thought will be, “Still the grace of the Lord, which dwells within my house, will not leave it desolate.” If his crops are blasted, mildewed, cut off by frost, or struck down by hail, and he sees famine before him, he will not however despond or murmur against God, but maintain his confidence in Him: “We thy people, and sheep of thy pasture, will give thee thanks forever” (Psa 79:13). He will supply me with food, even in the extreme of sterility. If he is afflicted with disease, the sharpness of the pain will not so overcome him, as to make him break out with impatience and expostulate⁵³ with God. But, recognizing justice and lenity⁵⁴ in the rod, [he] will patiently endure. In short, whatever happens, knowing that it is ordered by the Lord, he will receive it with a placid and grateful mind and will not contumaciously⁵⁵ resist the government of Him, at Whose disposal he has placed himself and all that he has.

Especially let the Christian breast eschew that foolish and most miserable consolation of the heathen, who, to strengthen their mind against adversity, imputed it to fortune. [Against fortune] they deemed it absurd to feel indignant, as she was blind⁵⁶ and rash, and blindly wounded the good equally with the bad. On the contrary, the rule of piety is that the hand of God is the ruler and arbiter of the fortunes of all, and instead of rushing on with thoughtless violence, dispenses good and evil with perfect regularity.

⁴⁶ **retrograde** – move backward.

⁴⁷ **accidents** – events.

⁴⁸ **ever and anon** – continually at intervals.

⁴⁹ **sterility** – barrenness of the land, producing no crops.

⁵⁰ **penury** – extreme poverty.

⁵¹ **execrate** – to curse; pronounce evil against.

⁵² **censure** – harshly criticize.

⁵³ **expostulate** – dispute.

⁵⁴ **lenity** – mercy.

⁵⁵ **contumaciously** – rebelliously.

⁵⁶ Here Calvin used the Greek *askopos*.

PART TWO: BEARING THE CROSS— A PART OF SELF-DENIAL

Sections 1-2

We Are to Take up Our Cross as Followers of Christ

Section 1 Christ's Cross and Ours

The pious mind must ascend still higher, namely, whither Christ calls His disciples when He says that every one of them must “take up his cross” (Mat 16:24). Those whom the Lord has chosen and honored with His [fellowship] must prepare for a hard, laborious, troubled life, a life full of many and various kinds of evils—it being the will of our heavenly Father to exercise His people in this way while putting them to the proof. Having begun this course with Christ the first-born, He continues it towards all His children. For though that Son was dear to Him above others, the Son in Whom He was “well pleased” (Mat 3:17; 17:5), yet we see that far from being treated gently and indulgently, we may say that not only was He subjected to a perpetual cross while He dwelt on earth, but His whole life was nothing else than a kind of perpetual cross. The Apostle assigns the reason: “Though he was a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered” (Heb 5:8).

Why then should we exempt ourselves from that condition to which Christ our Head behoved to submit—especially since He submitted on our account that He might in His own person exhibit a model of patience? Wherefore, the Apostle declares that all the children of God are destined to be conformed to Him (Rom 8:29). Hence, it affords us great consolation in hard and difficult circumstances, which men deem evil and adverse, to think that we are holding fellowship with the sufferings of Christ: as He passed to celestial glory through a labyrinth of many woes, so we too are conducted thither through various tribulations. For in another passage, Paul himself thus speaks, “We must through much tribulation enter the kingdom of God” (Act 14:22). Again, “That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death” (Phi 3:10). How powerfully should it soften the bitterness of the cross to think that the more we are afflicted with adversity, the surer we are made of our fellowship with Christ, by communion with Whom our sufferings are not only blessed to us, but tend greatly to the furtherance of our salvation.

Section 2 The Cross Leads Us to Perfect Trust in God's Power

We may add that the only thing that made it necessary for our Lord to undertake to bear the cross was to testify and prove His obedience to the Father. There are many reasons that make it necessary for us to live constantly under the cross. Feeble as we are by nature and prone to ascribe all perfection to our flesh—unless we receive as it were ocular⁵⁷ demonstration of our weakness—we readily estimate our virtue above its proper worth and doubt not that whatever happens it will stand unimpaired and invincible against all difficulties. Hence, we indulge a stupid and empty confidence in the flesh, and then, trusting to it, wax proud against the Lord Himself as if our own faculties were sufficient without His grace.

This arrogance cannot be better repressed than when He proves to us by experience, not only how great our weakness, but also our frailty, is. Therefore, He visits us with disgrace, poverty, bereavement, disease, or other afflictions. Feeling altogether unable to support them, we forthwith, as far as regards ourselves, give way, and thus humbled learn to invoke His strength, which alone can enable us to bear up under a weight of affliction. Nay, even the holiest of men, however well aware that they stand not in their own strength but by the grace of God, would feel too secure in their own fortitude and constancy, were they not brought to a more thorough knowledge of themselves by the trial of the cross. This feeling gained even upon David: “In my prosperity I said, I shall never be moved. Lord, by thy favor thou hast made my mountain to stand strong: thou didst hide thy face, and I was troubled” (Psa 30:6-7). He confesses that in prosperity his feelings were dulled and blunted, so that, neglecting the grace of God on which alone he ought to have depended, he leant to himself and promised himself perpetuity. If it so happened to this great prophet, who of us should not fear and study caution?

Though in tranquility they flatter themselves with the idea of greater constancy and patience, yet, humbled by adversity, they learn the deception. Believers, I say, warned by such proofs of their diseases, make progress in humility and, divesting themselves of a depraved confidence in the flesh, betake themselves to the grace of God. When they have so betaken themselves, [they] experience the presence of the divine power in which is ample protection.

⁵⁷ **ocular** – visible; received by actual sight.

Sections 3-6

This Is Needful to Teach Us Patience and Obedience

Section 3 The Cross Permits Us to Experience God's Faithfulness and Gives Us Hope for the Future

This Paul teaches when he says that tribulation worketh patience and patience experience (Rom 5:3-4). God having promised that He will be with believers in tribulation (2Co 1:4), they feel the truth of the promise; while supported by His hand, they endure patiently. This they could never do by their own strength. Patience, therefore, gives the saints an experimental proof that God in reality furnishes the aid that He has promised whenever there is need. Hence also their faith is confirmed, for it were very ungrateful not to expect that in [the] future the truth of God will be, as they have already found it, firm and constant. We now see how many advantages are at once produced by the cross. Overturning the overweening⁵⁸ opinion we form of our own virtue and detecting the hypocrisy in which we delight, it removes our pernicious carnal confidence, teaching us, when thus humbled, to recline on God alone, so that we neither are oppressed nor despond. Then, victory is followed by hope, inasmuch as the Lord, by performing what He has promised, establishes His truth concerning the future. Were these the only reasons, it is surely plain how necessary it is for us to bear the cross.

It is of no little importance to be rid of your self-love and made fully conscious of your weakness; so impressed with a sense of your weakness as to learn to distrust yourself; to distrust yourself so as to transfer your confidence to God, reclining on Him with such heartfelt confidence as to trust in His aid and continue invincible to the end, standing by His grace so as to perceive that He is true to His promises and so assured of the certainty of His promises as to be strong in hope.

Section 4 The Cross Trains Us to Patience and Obedience

Another end that the Lord has in afflicting His people is to try their patience and train them to obedience: they can [not] yield obedience to Him except in so far as He enables them. But He is pleased thus to attest and display striking proofs of the graces that He has conferred upon His saints, lest they should remain within—unseen and unemployed. Accordingly, by bringing forward openly the strength and constancy of endurance with which He has provided His servants, He is said to try their patience. Hence, the expressions that God tempted Abraham (Gen 22:1, 12) and made proof of his piety by [the fact that he declined not] to sacrifice his only son. Hence, too, Peter tells us that our faith is proved by tribulation, just as gold is tried in a furnace of fire (1Pe 1:7). But who will say it is not expedient that the most excellent gift of patience that the believer has received from His God should be applied to uses by being made sure and manifest? Otherwise men would never value it according to its worth.

But if God Himself, to prevent the virtues that He has conferred upon believers from lurking in obscurity, nay, lying useless and perishing, does aright in supplying materials for calling them forth, there is the best reason for the afflictions of the saints, since without them their patience could not exist. I say that by the cross they are also trained to obedience because they are thus taught to live not according to their own wish, but at the disposal of God. Indeed, did all things proceed as they wish, they would not know what it is to follow God. Seneca⁵⁹ mentions that there was an old proverb when any one was exhorted to endure adversity, "*Follow God,*" thereby intimating that men truly submitted to the yoke of God only when they gave their back and hand to His rod. But if it is most right that we should prove our obedience to our heavenly Father in all things, certainly we ought not to decline any method by which He trains us to obedience.

Section 5 The Cross as Medicine

Still, however, we see not how necessary that obedience is, unless we at the same time consider how prone our carnal nature is to shake off the yoke of God whenever it has been treated with some degree of gentleness and indulgence. It just happens to it as with refractory⁶⁰ horses, which, if kept idle for a few days at hack and manger,⁶¹ become ungovernable and no longer recognize the rider, whose command before they implicitly obeyed. And we invariably become what God complains of in the people of Israel: waxing gross and fat, we kick against Him Who reared and nursed us (Deu 32:15). The kindness of God should allure us to ponder and love His goodness. But since such is our malignity that we are invariably corrupted by His indulgence, it is more than necessary for us to be restrained by discipline from breaking forth into such petulance. Thus, lest we become emboldened by an over-abundance of wealth; lest elated with honor, we grow proud; lest inflated with other advantages of body, mind, or fortune, we grow insolent—the Lord Himself interferes as He sees to be expedient by means of the cross, subduing and curbing the arrogance of our flesh, and that in various ways as the advantage of each requires. For as we do not all equally labor under the same disease, so we do not all need the same difficult cure. Hence, we see that all are not exercised with the same kind of cross. While the heavenly Physician treats some more gently, in the case of others He employs harsher remedies, His purpose being to provide a cure for all. Still none is left free and untouched because He knows that all without a single exception are diseased.

⁵⁸ **overweening** – arrogant.

⁵⁹ **Lucius Annaeus Seneca** (4 BC – 65AD) was a Roman Stoic philosopher, statesman, dramatist, and in one work, humorist. He was tutor and later advisor to the Roman emperor Nero.

⁶⁰ **refractory** – unmanageable; stubborn.

⁶¹ **hack and manger** – in comfortable circumstance; in plenty.

Section 6 The Cross as Fatherly Chastisement

We may add, that our most merciful Father requires not only to prevent our weakness, but often to correct our past fault, that He may keep us in due obedience. Therefore, whenever we are afflicted we ought immediately to call to mind our past life. In this way, we will find that the faults that we have committed are deserving of such castigation.⁶² Yet the exhortation to patience is not to be founded chiefly on the acknowledgment of sin. For Scripture supplies a far better consideration when it says that in adversity, “We are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world” (1Co 11:32). Therefore, in the very bitterness of tribulation we ought to recognize the kindness and mercy of our Father, since even then He ceases not to further our salvation. For He afflicts [us] not that He may ruin or destroy, but rather that He may deliver us from the condemnation of the world. Let this thought lead us to what Scripture elsewhere teaches: “My son, despise not the chastening of the Lord; neither be weary of his correction: For whom the Lord loveth he correcteth; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth” (Pro 3:11-12). When we perceive our Father’s rod, is it not our part to behave as obedient docile sons rather than rebelliously imitate desperate men, who are hardened in wickedness? God dooms us to destruction if He does not by correction call us back when we have fallen off from Him—so that it is truly said, “If ye be without chastisement...then are ye bastards, and not sons” (Heb 12:8).

We are most perverse then if we cannot bear Him while He is manifesting His good-will to us and the care that He takes of our salvation. Scripture states the difference between believers and unbelievers to be that the latter, as the slaves of inveterate⁶³ and deep-seated iniquity, only become worse and more obstinate under the lash. The former, like freeborn sons, turn to repentance. Now, therefore, choose your class. But as I have already spoken of this subject, it is sufficient to have here briefly adverted⁶⁴ to it.

Sections 7-8 Bearing the Cross in Persecution and Other Calamities

Section 7 Suffering for Righteousness’ Sake

There is singular consolation, moreover, when we are persecuted for righteousness’ sake. For our thought should then be on how much honor God bestows upon us in distinguishing us by the special badge of His soldiers. By suffering persecution for righteousness’ sake, I mean not only striving for the defense of the Gospel, but for the defense of righteousness in any way. Therefore, whether in maintaining the truth of God against the lies of Satan or defending the good and innocent against the injuries of the bad, we are obliged to incur the offence and hatred of the world, so as to endanger life, fortune, or honor. Let us not grieve or decline so far to spend ourselves for God; let us not think ourselves wretched in those things in which He with His own lips has pronounced us blessed (Mat 5:10). Poverty, indeed considered in itself is misery; so is exile, contempt, imprisonment, ignominy:⁶⁵ finally, death itself is the last of all calamities. But when the favor of God breathes upon us, there is none of these things that may not turn out to our happiness. Let us then be contented with the testimony of Christ rather than with the false estimate of the flesh, and then, after the example of the Apostles, we will rejoice in being “counted worthy to suffer shame for his name” (Act 5:41). For why? If, while conscious of our innocence, we are deprived of our substance by the wickedness of man, we are no doubt reduced to poverty, humanly speaking; but in truth, our riches in heaven are increased. If driven from our homes, we have a more welcome reception into the family of God; if vexed and despised, we are more firmly rooted in Christ; if stigmatized by disgrace and ignominy, we have a higher place in the kingdom of God; and if we are slain, entrance is thereby given us to eternal life. The Lord having set such a price upon us, let us be ashamed to estimate ourselves at less than the shadowy and evanescent⁶⁶ allurements of the present life.

Section 8 Suffering under the Cross, the Christian Finds Consolation in God

By these and similar considerations, Scripture abundantly solaces us for the ignominy or calamities that we endure in defense of righteousness. [Accordingly], we are very ungrateful if we do not willingly and cheerfully receive them at the hand of the Lord—especially since this form of the cross is the most appropriate to believers, being that by which Christ desires to be glorified in us, as Peter also declares (1Pe 4:11, 14). But as to ingenuous⁶⁷ natures, it is more bitter to suffer disgrace than a hundred deaths. Paul expressly reminds us that not only persecution, but also disgrace awaits us, “because we trust in the living God” (1Ti 4:10). So in another passage he bids us, after his example, [to] walk “by evil report and good report” (2Co 6:8).

⁶² **castigation** – chastening; corrective punishment.

⁶³ **inveterate** – habitual.

⁶⁴ **adverted** – referred.

⁶⁵ **ignominy** – public disgrace; dishonor.

⁶⁶ **evanescent** – vanishing; fleeting; passing away.

⁶⁷ **ingenuous** – noble; generous.

The cheerfulness required, however, does not imply a total insensibility to pain. The saints could show no patience under the cross if they were not both tortured with pain and grievously molested. Were there no hardship in poverty, no pain in disease, no sting in ignominy, no fear in death, where would be the fortitude and moderation in enduring them? But while every one of these, by its inherent bitterness, naturally vexes the mind, the believer in this displays his fortitude: though fully sensible of the bitterness and labouring grievously, he still withstands and struggles boldly. In this, [he] displays his patience: though sharply stung, he is however curbed by the fear of God from breaking forth into any excess. In this, [he] displays his alacrity:⁶⁸ though pressed with sorrow and sadness, he rests satisfied with spiritual consolation from God.

Sections 9-11

The Christian Meets Suffering as Sent by God, but with no Stoic Insensibility

Section 9 The Christian, unlike the Stoic,⁶⁹ Gives Expression to His Pain and Sorrow

This conflict that believers maintain against the natural feeling of pain, while they study moderation and patience, Paul elegantly describes in these words: “We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed” (2Co 4:8-9). You see that to bear the cross patiently is not to have your feelings altogether blunted. [Nor is it] to be absolutely insensible to pain, according to the absurd description that the Stoics of old gave of their hero as one who, divested of humanity, was affected in the same way by adversity and prosperity, grief and joy—like a stone, [he] was not affected by anything. And what did they gain by that sublime wisdom? They exhibited a shadow of patience that never did and never can exist among men. Nay, rather by aiming at a too exact and rigid patience, they banished it altogether from human life.

Now also we have among Christians a new kind of Stoics, who hold it vicious⁷⁰ not only to groan and weep, but even to be sad and anxious. These paradoxes are usually started by indolent⁷¹ men who, employing themselves more in speculation than in action, can do nothing else for us than beget such paradoxes. But we have nothing to do with that iron philosophy that our Lord and Master condemned—not only in word, but also by His own example. For He both grieved and shed tears for His own and others’ woes. Nor did He teach His disciples differently: “Ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice” (Joh 16:20). And lest any one should regard this as vicious, He expressly declares, “Blessed are they that mourn” (Mat 5:4). And no wonder! If all tears are condemned, what shall we think of our Lord Himself, whose “sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (Luk 22:44; Mat 26:38)? If every kind of fear is a mark of unbelief, what place shall we assign to the dread that, it is said, in no slight degree amazed Him (Mat 26:37; Mar 14:33)? If all sadness is condemned, how shall we justify Him when He confesses, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death” (Mat 26:38)?

Section 10 Real Sorrow and Real Patience in Conflict with Each Other

I wished to make these observations to keep pious minds from despair, lest, from feeling it impossible to divest themselves of the natural feeling of grief, they might altogether abandon the study of patience. This must necessarily be the result with those who convert patience into stupor,⁷² and a brave and firm man into a block.⁷³ Scripture gives saints the praise of endurance when, though afflicted by the hardships they endure, they are not crushed. Though they feel bitterly, they are at the same time filled with spiritual joy. Though pressed with anxiety, [they] breathe exhilarated by the consolation of God. Still there is a certain degree of repugnance⁷⁴ in their hearts because natural sense shuns and dreads what is adverse to it, while pious affection, even through these difficulties, tries to obey the divine will. This repugnance the Lord expressed when He thus addressed Peter: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself and walkedst whither thou wouldst; but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee; and carry thee whither thou wouldest not” (Joh 21:18). It is not probable, indeed, that when it became necessary to glorify God by death he was driven to it unwilling and resisting; had it been so, little praise would have been due to his martyrdom. Though he obeyed the divine ordination with the greatest alacrity of heart, yet, as he had not divested himself of humanity, he was distracted by a double will. When he thought of the bloody death that he was to die, struck with horror, he would willingly have avoided it. On the other hand, when he considered that it was God Who called him to it, his fear was vanquished and suppressed, and he met death cheerfully.

⁶⁸ **alacrity** – cheerful willingness.

⁶⁹ **Stoic** – a member of a Greek school of philosophy, founded by Zeno about 308 B.C., believing that human beings should repress emotion, be indifferent to pain or pleasure, and should calmly accept all occurrences as the unavoidable result of divine will or of the natural order.

⁷⁰ **vicious** – depraved; wicked.

⁷¹ **indolent** – idle.

⁷² **stupor** – being devoid of passion or feeling.

⁷³ **block** – the stock of a tree that was shaped into deaf and sightless idol.

⁷⁴ **repugnance** – contradiction.

It must therefore be our study, if we would be disciples of Christ, to imbue our minds with such reverence and obedience to God as may tame and subjugate all affections contrary to His appointment. In this way, whatever be the kind of cross to which we are subjected, we shall in the greatest straits firmly maintain our patience. Adversity will have its bitterness and sting us: when afflicted with disease, we shall groan and be disquieted and long for health. Pressed with poverty, we shall feel the stings of anxiety and sadness—feel the pain of ignominy, contempt, and injury. [We shall] pay the tears due to nature at the death of our friends. But our conclusion will always be, "The Lord so willed it; therefore let us follow His will." Nay, amid the pungency⁷⁵ of grief, among groans and tears, this thought will necessarily suggest itself and incline us cheerfully to endure the things for which we are so afflicted.

Section 11 Patience According to Philosophic and Christian Understanding

But since the chief reason for enduring the cross has been derived from a consideration of the divine will, we must, in few words, explain wherein the difference between philosophical and Christian patience lies. Indeed, very few of the philosophers advanced so far as to perceive that the hand of God tries us by means of affliction, and that we ought in this matter to obey God. The only reason that they adduce is that *so it must be*. But is not this just to say that we must yield to God because it is in vain to contend against Him? For if we obey God only because it is necessary, provided we can escape, we shall cease to obey Him. But what Scripture calls us to consider in the will of God is very different: namely, first justice and equity, and then a regard to our own salvation. Hence, Christian exhortations to patience are of this nature. Whether poverty, exile, imprisonment, contumely,⁷⁶ disease, bereavement, or any such evil affects us, we must think that none of them happens except by the will and providence of God, that everything He does is in the most perfect order.

What! Do not our numberless daily faults deserve to be chastised more severely and with a heavier rod than His mercy lays upon us? Is it not most right that our flesh should be subdued and be, as it were, accustomed to the yoke, so as not to rage and wanton as it lists?⁷⁷ Are not the justice and the truth of God worthy of our suffering on their account? But if the equity of God is undoubtedly displayed in affliction, we cannot murmur or struggle against them without iniquity. We no longer hear the frigid cant,⁷⁸ "Yield because it is necessary"; but a living and energetic precept, "Obey because it is unlawful to resist. Bear patiently, because impatience is rebellion against the justice of God."

Then, as that only seems to us attractive that we perceive to be for our own safety and advantage, here also our heavenly Father consoles us by the assurance that in the very cross with which He afflicts us, He provides for our salvation. But if it is clear that tribulations are salutary⁷⁹ to us, why should we not receive them with calm and grateful minds?

In bearing them patiently, we are not submitting to necessity, but resting satisfied with our own good. The effect of these thoughts is that to whatever extent our minds are contracted by the bitterness that we naturally feel under the cross, to the same extent will they be expanded with spiritual joy. Hence arises thanksgiving, which cannot exist unless joy be felt. But if the praise of the Lord and thanksgiving can emanate only from a cheerful and gladdened breast—and there is nothing that ought to interrupt these feelings in us—it is clear how necessary it is to temper the bitterness of the cross with spiritual joy.



⁷⁵ **pungency** – painful pricks.

⁷⁶ **contumely** – rude language or treatment arising from haughtiness and contempt.

⁷⁷ **rage...lists** – lustfully rage as it wishes.

⁷⁸ **frigid cant** – a cold and mechanical repetition of a set form of words.

⁷⁹ **salutary** – beneficial.