

## Overcoming (Part 5): Self-Denial

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The phrase "deny himself"—so characteristic of the life of a true Christian—is found in Scripture in only one of Jesus' sayings to His disciples: "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him *deny himself*, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (Matthew 16:24; see also Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). The Greek verb translated *deny* also means "to say no." Luke's version of Jesus' teaching adds that we should do this daily. But what does Jesus mean that a person must deny himself? We continue in this Bible study series on impediments to overcoming by exploring self-denial, a "must-have" key to Christian growth.

**1. What must we deny ourselves?** Matthew 16:24-26; Romans 12:1-2; I Thessalonians 4:1-8; I Peter 4:2; I John 2:15-17.

**Comment:** Jesus calls upon His followers to reject the natural human inclination toward self. The first step is to submit and surrender to God our will, our affections, our bodies, and our lives. Our own pleasures and happiness can no longer be primary goals. Instead, we must be willing to renounce all and lay down our lives, if required. Peter admonishes us to "no longer live . . . in the flesh for the lusts of men," meaning we should no longer pursue wrong desires. Are we willing to forsake all, to give up everything including our lives? Our Christian duty is to deny our lust of the flesh.

**2. Does the New Testament refer to self-denial in other ways?** Matthew 10:38; Luke 14:33; Galatians 5:24; Ephesians 4:22-24; Colossians 3:5-10.

**Comment:** Christ calls us to *take up our cross* and follow His example. This call is not so much a call to martyrdom as a command to deny self or, *crucify the flesh*, even to the point of death. We must be prepared to die, if that is where the course of events leads, but in most cases it is not so much literal martyrdom as it is to have the attitude of self-denial that is willing to give up all. Christ's disciples live to serve God, not self. Paul admonishes us to *put off* our former conduct and put to death our sinful actions.

**3. How does self-denial relate to temptation?** James 1:12-15. What are some of the temptations we must deny ourselves? Proverbs 6:16-19; 23:2; Matthew 6:1-4, 16-21; Galatians 5:19-21; Hebrews 11:24-26.

**Comment:** As soon as we are tempted, we must begin to deny ourselves the wrong desire. Jesus calls us to practice self-denial in our actions even before we do them. Temptations vary according to the weaknesses of each person. What may be an easy self-denial for one may be tough to resist for another. Appetite, material goods, worldly ambitions, personal prestige and sexual desires are very common areas where self-denial is tough for many.

**4. Did Jesus Himself practice self-denial?** Mark 8:31-34; 10:42-45; Luke 9:21-22; John 13:1-17; II Corinthians 8:9; Philippians 2:5-11; I Peter 2:20-24.

**Comment:** Jesus teaches self-denial to His disciples not only with His words but also by His actions. Notice that His call to self-denial comes immediately after predicting His own sacrificial death. He is the supreme model of the self-denial to which He calls others. He even denies Himself any urge to avenge Himself or to threaten His persecutors for what they had done to Him. In Jesus' example, we see that, by committing ourselves to God who judges rightly, we deny ourselves the temptation of worldly lusts.

**5.** Can we deny ourselves sinful acts without submitting to God? Romans 6:1-13; Colossians 2:12-15; II Timothy 2:11-12; Titus 1:16; James 4:7-10; I Peter 5:6-10.

**Comment:** The concept of self-denial is at the heart of Paul's teaching on submission to God: We have died with Christ and must sacrifice our lives for Him. In Titus 2:12, Paul writes of the grace of God training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, that is, to deny what the self desires. Self-denial requires genuine humility in submission, or it is merely a counterfeit.

**6.** Can God deny Himself? Numbers 23:19; Hebrews 6:17-18; II Timothy 2:13.

**Comment:** A somewhat different use of the concept *deny oneself* occurs in II Timothy 2:13. God is faithful and cannot deny His character or His promises (Romans 3:3). However, a comparison of Paul's statement with Jesus' call to self-denial is enlightening. God, being so different from self-centered men, has nothing in His perfect character that needs to be denied. In His perfect goodness, God can only affirm Himself.

The New Testament calls us to deny ourselves, but never to deny Jesus or the Father (Matthew 10:33; II Peter 2:1; I John 2:22, 23; Jude 4; Revelation 2:13; 3:8). Luke 18:28-30 tells us that if we deny ourselves—and even our family members, if necessary—for the sake of the Kingdom of God, we will be rewarded many times over.