



SELF-DENIAL



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BY GEORGE MACDONALD

St. Luke ix. 23, 24.

'And he said unto all, If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whosoever would save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it.'

Christ is the way out, and the way in; the way from slavery, conscious or unconscious, into liberty; the way from the unhomeliness of things to the home we desire but do not know; the way from the stormy skirts of the Father's garments to the peace of his bosom. To picture him, we need not only endless figures, but sometimes quite opposing figures: he is not only the door of the sheepfold, but the shepherd of the sheep; he is not only the way, but the leader in the way, the rock that followed, and the captain of our salvation. We must become as little children, and Christ must be born in us; we must learn of him, and the one lesson he has to give is himself: he does first all he wants us to do; he is first all he wants us to be. We must not merely do as he did; we must see things as he saw them, regard them as he regarded them; we must take the will of God as the very life of our being; we must neither try to get our own way, nor trouble ourselves as to what may be thought or said of us. The world must be to us as nothing.

I would not be misunderstood if I may avoid it: when I say the world, I do not mean the world God makes and means, yet less the human hearts that live therein; but the world man makes by choosing the perversion of his own nature—a world apart from and opposed to God's world. By the world I mean all ways of judging, regarding, and thinking, whether political, economical, ecclesiastical, social, or individual, which are not divine, which are not God's ways of thinking, regarding, or judging; which do not take God into account, do not set his will supreme, as the one only law of life; which do not care for the truth of things, but the customs of society, or the practice of the trade; which heed not what is right, but the usage of the time. From everything that is against the teaching and thinking of Jesus, from the world in the heart of the best man in it, specially from the world in his own heart, the disciple must turn to follow him. The first thing in all progress is to leave something behind; to follow him is to leave one's self behind. 'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself.'

Some seem to take this to mean that the disciple must go against his likings because they are his likings; must be unresponsive to the tendencies and directions and inclinations that are his, because they are such, and his; they seem to think something is gained by abstinence from what is pleasant, or by the doing of what is disagreeable—that to thwart the lower nature is in itself a good. Now I will not dare say what a man may not get good from, if the thing be done in simplicity and honesty. I believe that when a man, for the sake of doing the thing that is right, does in mistake that which is not right, God will take care that he be shown the better way—will perhaps use the very thing which is his mistake to reveal to him the mistake it is. I will allow that the mere effort of will, arbitrary and uninformed of duty, partaking of the character of tyranny and even schism, may add to the man's power over his lower nature; but in that very nature it is God who must rule and not the man, however well he may mean. From a man's rule of himself, in smallest opposition, however devout, to the law of his being, arises the huge danger of nourishing, by the pride of self-conquest, a far worse than even the unchained animal self—the demoniac self. True victory over self is the victory of God in the man, not of the man alone. It is not subjugation that is enough, but subjugation by God. In whatever man does without God, he must fail miserably—or succeed more miserably. No portion of a man can rule another portion, for God, not the man, created it, and the part is greater than the whole. In effecting what God does not mean, a man but falls into fresh ill conditions. In crossing his natural, therefore in themselves right inclinations, a man may develop a self-satisfaction which in its very nature is a root of all sin.

Doing the thing God does not require of him, he puts himself in the place of God, becoming not a law but a law-giver to himself, one who commands, not one who obeys. The diseased satisfaction which some minds feel in laying burdens on themselves, is a pampering, little as they may suspect it, of the most dangerous appetite of that self which they think they are mortifying. All the creatures of God are good, received with thanksgiving; then only can any one of them become evil, when it is used in relations in which a higher law forbids it, or when it is refused for the sake of self-discipline, in relations in which no higher law forbids, and God therefore allows it. For a man to be his own schoolmaster, is a right dangerous position; the pupil cannot be expected to make progress—except, indeed, in the wrong direction. To enjoy heartily and thankfully, and do cheerfully without, when God wills we should, is the way to live in regard to things of the lower nature; these must nowise be confounded with the things of the world. If any one say this is dangerous doctrine, I answer, 'The law of God is enough for me, and for laws invented by man, I will none of them. They are false, and come all of rebellion. God and not man is our judge.'

Verily it is not to thwart or tease the poor self Jesus tells us. That was not the purpose for which God gave it to us I He tells us we must leave it altogether—yield it, deny it, refuse it, lose it: thus only shall we save it, thus only have a share in our own being. The self is given to us that we may sacrifice it; it is ours that we like Christ may have somewhat to offer—not that we should torment it, but that we should deny it; not that we should cross it, but that we should abandon it utterly: then it can no more be vexed.

'What can this mean?—we are not to thwart, but to abandon? How abandon, without thwarting?'

It means this:—we must refuse, abandon, deny self altogether as a ruling, or determining, or originating element in us. It is to be no longer the regent of our action. We are no more to think, 'What should I like to do?' but 'What would the Living One have me do?' It is not selfish to take that which God has made us to desire; neither are we very good to yield it—we should only be very bad not to do so, when he would take it from us; but to yield it heartily, without a struggle or regret, is not merely to deny the Self a thing it would like, but to deny the Self itself, to refuse and abandon it. The Self is God's making—only it must be the 'slave of Christ,' that the Son may make it also the free son of the same Father; it must receive all from him—not as from nowhere; as well as the deeper soul, it must follow him, not its own desires. It must not be its own law; Christ must be its law. The time will come when it shall be so possessed, so enlarged, so idealized, by the indwelling God, who is its deeper, its deepest self, that there will be no longer any enforced denial of it needful; it has been finally denied and refused and sent into its own obedient place; it has learned to receive with thankfulness, to demand nothing; to turn no more upon its own centre, or any more think to minister to its own good. God's eternal denial of himself, revealed in him who for our sakes in the flesh took up his cross daily, will have been developed in the man; his eternal rejoicing will be in God—and in his fellows, before whom he will cast his glad self to be a carpet for their walk, a footstool for their rest, a stair for their climbing.

To deny oneself then, is to act no more from the standing-ground of self; to allow no private communication, no passing influence between the self and the will; not to let the right hand know what the left hand doeth. No grasping or seeking, no hungering of the individual, shall give motion to the will; no desire to be conscious of worthiness shall order the life; no ambition whatever shall be a motive of action; no wish to surpass another be allowed a moment's respite from death; no longing after the praise of men influence a single throb of the heart. To deny the self is to shrink from no dispraise or condemnation or contempt of the community, or circle, or country, which is against the mind of the Living one; for no love or entreaty of father or mother, wife or child, friend or lover, to turn aside from following him, but forsake them all as any ruling or ordering power in our lives; we must do nothing to please them that would not first be pleasing to him. Bight deeds, and not the judgment thereupon; true words, and not what reception they may have, shall be our care. Not merely shall we not love money, or trust in it, or seek it as the business of life, but, whether we have it or have it not, we must never think of it as a windfall from the tree of event or the cloud of circumstance, but as the gift of God. We must draw our life, by the uplooking, acknowledging will, every moment fresh from the living one, the causing life, not glory in the mere consciousness of health and being. It is God feeds us, warms us, quenches our thirst. The will of God must be to us all in all; to our whole nature the life of the Father must be the joy of the child; we must know our very understanding his—that we live and feed on him every hour in the closest, veriest way: to know these things in the depth of our knowing, is to deny

ourselves, and take God instead. To try after them is to begin the denial, to follow him who never sought his own. So must we deny all anxieties and fears. When young we must not mind what the world calls failure; as we grow old, we must not be vexed that we cannot remember, must not regret that we cannot do, must not be miserable because we grow weak or ill: we must not mind anything. We have to do with God who can, not with ourselves where we cannot; we have to do with the Will, with the Eternal Life of the Father of our spirits, and not with the being which we could not make, and which is his care. He is our care; we are his; our care is to will his will; his care, to give us all things. This is to deny ourselves. 'Self, I have not to consult you, but him whose idea is the soul of you, and of which as yet you are all unworthy. I have to do, not with you, but with the source of you, by whom it is that any moment you exist—the Causing of you, not the caused you. You may be my consciousness, but you are not my being. If you were, what a poor, miserable, dingy, weak wretch I should be! but my life is hid with Christ in God, whence it came, and whither it is returning—with you certainly, but as an obedient servant, not a master. Submit, or I will cast you from me, and pray to have another consciousness given me. For God is more to me than my consciousness of myself. He is my life; you are only so much of it as my poor half-made being can grasp—as much of it as I can now know at once. Because I have fooled and spoiled you, treated you as if you were indeed my own self, you have dwindled yourself and have lessened me, till I am ashamed of myself. If I were to mind what you say, I should soon be sick of you; even now I am ever and anon disgusted with your paltry, mean face, which I meet at every turn. No! let me have the company of the Perfect One, not of you! of my elder brother, the Living One! I will not make a friend of the mere shadow of my own being! Good-bye, Self! I deny you, and will do my best every day to leave you behind me.'

And in this regard we must not fail to see, or seeing ever forget, that, when Jesus tells us we must follow him, we must come to him, we must believe in him, he speaks first and always as the Son of the Father—and that in the active sense, as the obedient God, not merely as one who claims the sonship for the ground of being and so of further claim. He is the Son of the Father as the Son who obeys the Father, as the Son who came expressly and only to do the will of the Father, as the messenger whose delight it is to do the will of him that sent him. At the moment he says Follow me, he is following the Father; his face is set homeward. He would have us follow him because he is bent on the will of the Blessed. It is nothing even thus to think of him, except thus we believe in him—that is, so do. To believe in him is to do as he does, to follow him where he goes. We must believe in him practically—altogether practically, as he believed in his Father; not as one concerning whom we have to hold something, but as one whom we have to follow out of the body of this death into life eternal. It is not to follow him to take him in any way theoretically, to hold this or that theory about why he died, or wherein lay his atonement: such things can be revealed only to those who follow him in his active being and the principle of his life—who do as he did, live as he lived. There is no other following. He is all for the Father; we must be all for the Father too, else are we not following him. To follow him is to be learning of him, to think his thoughts, to use his judgments, to see things as he saw them, to feel things as he felt them, to be hearted, souled, minded, as he was—that so also we may be of the same mind with his Father. This it is to deny self and go after him; nothing less, even if it be working miracles and casting out devils, is to be his disciple. Busy from morning to night doing great things for him on any other road, we should but earn the reception, 'I never knew you.' When he says, 'Take my yoke upon you,' he does not mean a yoke which he would lay upon our shoulders; it is his own yoke he tells us to take, and to learn of him—it is the yoke he is himself carrying, the yoke his perfect Father had given him to carry. The will of the Father is the yoke he would have us take, and bear also with him. It is of this yoke that he says, It is easy, of this burden, It is light. He is not saying, 'The yoke I lay upon you is easy, the burden light;' what he says is, 'The yoke I carry is easy, the burden on my shoulders is light.' With the garden of Gethsemane before him, with the hour and the power of darkness waiting for him, he declares his yoke easy, his burden light. There is no magnifying of himself. He first denies himself, and takes up his cross—then tells us to do the same. The Father magnifies the Son, not the Son himself; the Son magnifies the Father.

We must be jealous for God against ourselves, and look well to the cunning and deceitful Self—ever cunning and deceitful until it is informed of God—until it is thoroughly and utterly denied, and God is to it also All-in-all—till we have left it quite empty of our will and our regard, and God has come into it, and made it—not indeed an adytum, but a pylon for himself. Until then, its very denials, its very turnings from things dear to it for the sake of Christ, will tend to foster its self-regard, and generate in it a yet deeper self-worship. While it is not denied, only

thwarted, we may through satisfaction with conquered difficulty and supposed victory, minister yet more to its self-gratulation. The Self, when it finds it cannot have honour because of its gifts, because of the love lavished upon it, because of its conquests, and the 'golden opinions bought from all sorts of people,' will please itself with the thought of its abnegations, of its unselfishness, of its devotion to God, of its forsakings for his sake. It may not call itself, but it will soon feel itself a saint, a superior creature, looking down upon the foolish world and its ways, walking on high 'above the smoke and stir of this dim spot;'—all the time dreaming a dream of utter folly, worshipping itself with the more concentration that it has yielded the approbation of the world, and dismissed the regard of others: even they are no longer necessary to its assurance of its own worths and merits! In a thousand ways will Self delude itself, in a thousand ways befool its own slavish being. Christ sought not his own, sought not anything but the will of his Father: we have to grow diamond-clear, true as the white light of the morning. Hopeless task!—were it not that he offers to come himself, and dwell in us.

I have wondered whether the word of the Lord, 'take up his cross,' was a phrase in use at the time: when he used it first he had not yet told them that he would himself be crucified. I can hardly believe this form of execution such a common thing that the figure of bearing the cross had come into ordinary speech. As the Lord's idea was new to men, so I think was the image in which he embodied it. I grant it might, being such a hateful thing in the eyes of the Jews, have come to represent the worst misery of a human being; but would they be ready to use as a figure a fact which so sorely manifested their slavery? I hardly think it. Certainly it had not come to represent the thing he was now teaching, that self-abnegation which he had but newly brought to light—nay, hardly to the light yet—only the twilight; and nothing less, it seems to me, can have suggested the terrible symbol!

But we must note that, although the idea of the denial of self is an entire and absolute one, yet the thing has to be done daily: we must keep on denying. It is a deeper and harder thing than any sole effort of most herculean will may finally effect. For indeed the will itself is not pure, is not free, until the Self is absolutely denied. It takes long for the water of life that flows from the well within us, to permeate every outlying portion of our spiritual frame, subduing everything to itself, making it all of the one kind, until at last, reaching the outermost folds of our personality, it casts out disease, our bodies by indwelling righteousness are redeemed, and the creation delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God. Every day till then we have to take up our cross; every hour to see that we are carrying it. A birthright may be lost for a mess of pottage, and what Satan calls a trifle must be a thing of eternal significance.

Is there not many a Christian who, having begun to deny himself, yet spends much strength in the vain and evil endeavour to accommodate matters between Christ and the dear Self—seeking to save that which so he must certainly lose—in how different a way from that in which the Master would have him lose it! It is one thing to have the loved self devoured of hell in hate and horror and disappointment; another to yield it to conscious possession by the living God himself, who will raise it then first and only to its true individuality, freedom, and life. With its cause within it, then, indeed, it shall be saved!—how then should it but live! Here is the promise to those who will leave all and follow him: 'Whosoever shall lose his life, for my sake, the same shall save it,'—in St. Matthew, 'find it.' What speech of men or angels will serve to shadow the dimly glorious hope! To lose ourselves in the salvation of God's heart! to be no longer any care to ourselves, but know God taking divinest care of us, his own! to be and feel just a resting-place for the divine love—a branch of the tree of life for the dove to alight upon and fold its wings! to be an open air of love, a thoroughfare for the thoughts of God and all holy creatures! to know one's self by the reflex action of endless brotherly presence—yearning after nothing from any, but ever pouring out love by the natural motion of the spirit! to revel in the hundredfold of everything good we may have had to leave for his sake—above all, in the unsought love of those who love us as we love them—circling us round, bathing us in bliss—never reached after, ever received, ever welcomed, altogether and divinely precious! to know that God and we mean the same thing, that we are in the secret, the child's secret of existence, that we are pleasing in the eyes and to the heart of the Father! to live nestling at his knee, climbing to his bosom, blessed in the mere and simple being which is one with God, and is the outgoing of his will, justifying the being by the very facts of the being, by its awareness of itself as bliss!—what a self is this to receive again from him for that we left, forsook, refused! We left it paltry, low, mean; he took up the poor cinder of a consciousness, carried it back to the workshop of his spirit, made it a true thing, radiant, clear, fit for eternal companying and indwelling, and restored it to our having and

holding for ever!

All high things can be spoken only in figures; these figures, having to do with matters too high for them, cannot fit intellectually; they can be interpreted truly, understood aright, only by such as have the spiritual fact in themselves. When we speak of a man and his soul, we imply a self and a self, reacting on each other: we cannot divide ourselves so; the figure suits but imperfectly. It was never the design of the Lord to explain things to our understanding—nor would that in the least have helped our necessity; what we require is a means, a word, whereby to think with ourselves of high things: that is what a true figure, for a figure may be true while far from perfect, will always be to us. But the imperfection of his figures cannot lie in excess. Be sure that, in dealing with any truth, its symbol, however high, must come short of the glorious meaning itself holds. It is the low stupidity of an unspiritual nature that would interpret the Lord's meaning as less than his symbols. The true soul sees, or will come to see, that his words, his figures always represent more than they are able to present; for, as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are the heavenly things higher than the earthly signs of them, let the signs be good as ever sign may be. There is no joy belonging to human nature, as God made it, that shall not be enhanced a hundredfold to the man who gives up himself—though, in so doing, he may seem to be yielding the very essence of life. To yield self is to give up grasping at things in their second causes, as men call them, but which are merely God's means, and to receive them direct from their source—to take them seeing whence they come, and not as if they came from nowhere, because no one appears presenting them. The careless soul receives the Father's gifts as if it were a way things had of dropping into his hand. He thus grants himself a slave, dependent on chance and his own blundering endeavour—yet is he ever complaining, as if some one were accountable for the checks which meet him at every turn. For the good that comes to him, he gives no thanks—who is there to thank? at the disappointments that befall him he grumbles—there must be some one to blame! He does not think to what Power it could be of any consequence, nay, what power would not be worse than squandered, to sustain him after his own fashion, in his paltry, low-aimed existence! How could a God pour out his being to uphold the merest waste of his creatures? No world could ever be built or sustained on such an idea. It is the children who shall inherit the earth; such as will not be children, cannot possess. The hour is coming when all that art, all that science, all that nature, all that animal nature, in ennobling subjugation to the higher even as man is subject to the Father, can afford, shall be the possession, to the endless delight, of the sons and daughters of God: to him to whom he is all in all, God is able to give these things; to another he cannot give them, for he is unable to receive them who is outside the truth of them. Assuredly we are not to love God for the sake of what he can give us; nay, it is impossible to love him save because he is our God, and altogether good and beautiful; but neither may we forget what the Lord does not forget, that, in the end, when the truth is victorious, God will answer his creature in the joy of his heart. For what is joy but the harmony of the spirit! The good Father made his children to be joyful; only, ere they can enter into his joy, they must be like himself, ready to sacrifice joy to truth. No promise of such joy is an appeal to selfishness. Every reward held out by Christ is a pure thing; nor can it enter the soul save as a death to selfishness. The heaven of Christ is a loving of all, a forgetting of self, a dwelling of each in all, and all in each. Even in our nurseries, a joyful child is rarely selfish, generally righteous. It is not selfish to be joyful. What power could prevent him who sees the face of God from being joyful?—that bliss is his which lies behind all other bliss, without which no other bliss could ripen or last. The one bliss of the universe is the presence of God—which is simply God being to the man, and felt by the man as being, that which in his own nature he is—the indwelling power of his life. God must be to his creature what he is in himself, for it is by his essential being alone, that by which he is, that he can create. His presence is the unintermittent call and response of the creative to the created, of the father to the child. Where can be the selfishness in being so made happy? It may be deep selfishness to refuse to be happy. Is there selfishness in the Lord's seeing of the travail of his soul and being satisfied? Selfishness consists in taking the bliss from another; to find one's bliss in the bliss of another is not selfishness. Joy is not selfishness; and the greater the joy thus reaped, the farther is that joy removed from selfishness. The one bliss, next to the love of God, is the love of our neighbour. If any say, 'You love because it makes you blessed,' I deny it: 'We are blessed, I say, because we love.' No one could attain to the bliss of loving his neighbour who was selfish and sought that bliss from love of himself. Love is unselfishness. In the main we love because we cannot help it. There is no merit in it: how should there be in any love?—but neither is it selfish. There are many who confound righteousness with merit, and think there is nothing righteous where there is nothing meritorious. 'If it makes you happy to love,' they say, 'where is your merit? It is only selfishness!' There is no merit, I reply, yet the love that is born in us is our salvation from selfishness. It is of

the very essence of righteousness. Because a thing is joyful, it does not follow that I do it for the joy of it; yet when the joy is in others, the joy is pure. That certain joys should be joys, is the very denial of selfishness. The man would be a demoniacally selfish man, whom love itself did not make joyful. It is selfish to enjoy in content beholding others lack; even in the highest spiritual bliss, to sit careless of others would be selfishness, and the higher the bliss, the worse the selfishness; but surely that bliss is right altogether of which a great part consists in labour that others may share it. Such, I will not doubt—the labour to bring others in to share with us, will be a great part of our heavenly content and gladness. The making, the redeeming Father will find plenty of like work for his children to do. Dull are those, little at least can they have of Christian imagination, who think that where all are good, things must be dull. It is because there is so little good yet in them, that they know so little of the power or beauty of merest life divine. Let such make haste to be true. Interest will there be and variety enough, not without pain, in the ministration of help to those yet wearily toiling up the heights of truth—perhaps yet unwilling to part with miserable self, which cherishing they are not yet worth being, or capable of having.

Some of the things a man may have to forsake in following Christ, he has not to forsake because of what they are in themselves. Neither nature, art, science, nor fit society, is of those things a man will lose in forsaking himself: they are God's, and have no part in the world of evil, the false judgments, low wishes, and unrealities generally, that make up the conscious life of the self which has to be denied: such will never be restored to the man. But in forsaking himself to do what God requires of him—his true work in the world, that is, a man may find he has to leave some of God's things—not to repudiate them, but for the time to forsake them, because they draw his mind from the absolute necessities of the true life in himself or in others. He may have to deny himself in leaving them—not as bad things, but as things for which there is not room until those of paramount claim have been so heeded, that these will no longer impede but further them. Then he who knows God, will find that knowledge open the door of his understanding to all things else. He will become able to behold them from within, instead of having to search wearily into them from without. This gave to king David more understanding than had all his teachers. Then will the things he has had to leave, be restored to him a hundred fold. So will it be in the forsaking of friends. To forsake them for Christ, is not to forsake them as evil. It is not to cease to love them, 'for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?' it is—not to allow their love to cast even a shadow between us and our Master; to be content to lose their approval, their intercourse, even their affection, where the Master says one thing and they another. It is to learn to love them in a far higher, deeper, tenderer, truer way than before—a way which keeps all that was genuine in the former way, and loses all that was false. We shall love their selves, and disregard our own.

I do not forget the word of the Lord about hating father and mother: I have a glimpse of the meaning of it, but dare not attempt explaining it now. It is all against the self—not against the father and mother.

There is another kind of forsaking that may fall to the lot of some, and which they may find very difficult: the forsaking of such notions of God and his Christ as they were taught in their youth—which they held, nor could help holding, at such time as they began to believe—of which they have begun to doubt the truth, but to cast which away seems like parting with every assurance of safety.

There are so-called doctrines long accepted of good people, which how any man can love God and hold, except indeed by fast closing of the spiritual eyes, I find it hard to understand. If a man care more for opinion than for life, it is not worth any other man's while to persuade him to renounce the opinions he happens to entertain; he would but put other opinions in the same place of honour—a place which can belong to no opinion whatever: it matters nothing what such a man may or may not believe, for he is not a true man. By holding with a school he supposes to be right, he but bolsters himself up with the worst of all unbelief—opinion calling itself faith—unbelief calling itself religion. But for him who is in earnest about the will of God, it is of endless consequence that he should think rightly of God. He cannot come close to him, cannot truly know his will, while his notion of him is in any point that of a false god. The thing shows itself absurd. If such a man seem to himself to be giving up even his former assurance of salvation, in yielding such ideas of God as are unworthy of God, he must none the less, if he will be true, if he would enter into life, take up that cross also. He will come to see that he must follow no doctrine, be it true as word of man could state it, but the living Truth, the Master himself.

Good souls many will one day be horrified at the things they now believe of God. If they have not thought about them, but given themselves to obedience, they may not have done them much harm as yet; but they can make little progress in the knowledge of God, while, if but passively, holding evil things true of him. If, on the other hand, they do think about them, and find in them no obstruction, they must indeed be far from anything to be called a true knowledge of God. But there are those who find them a terrible obstruction, and yet imagine, or at least fear them true: such must take courage to forsake the false in any shape, to deny their old selves in the most seemingly sacred of prejudices, and follow Jesus, not as he is presented in the tradition of the elders, but as he is presented by himself, his apostles, and the spirit of truth. There are 'traditions of men' after Christ as well as before him, and far worse, as 'making of none effect' higher and better things; and we have to look to it, how we have learned Christ.

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