

25 PLEASING OR DENYING YOURSELF

Romans 15:1-3 We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbour for his good, leading to edification. For even Christ did not please Himself...

Matthew 16:24 ...If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.

If the devil cannot get us to deny God by active opposition through sin, he will employ the other tactic of getting us to be more preoccupied with ourselves than with God. This two-prong strategy of sin and self is manifested in a multitude of ways. For many Christians who have overcome the power of known outward sin, the conflict often takes the form of an inward struggle with self. Think of how much time and energy is wasted, how much work left undone, when we get bogged down by all kinds of negative self-reactions. The most potentially dangerous setback to any work of God is a wrong spirit. The chief deficiency is not the lack of time or resources but of an excellent and upright spirit. And the devil recognises and exploits this. If he can only get us into a huff, provoke and vex us in a negative way, how far it will set back and ruin God's work. The devil specialises in getting us down by accusing, deceiving, and deluding us into thinking too much of ourselves. This can take the form of either self-commendation or self-condemnation. Self that is not under the Spirit's control is amazingly adaptable in its deceptive disguises. It can manifest itself confidently in self-assertion, or diffidently in self-effacement. The clue that gives it away is self-consciousness.

The way to deal with self can similarly be either active or passive, depending on the form it takes. Sometimes the only treatment that works is a severe and drastic one – “cut it off” (*Mark 9:43, 45*), applying it to whatever the offending cause may be. Elsewhere in the New Testament, equally strong words are used for such uncompromising action: “put to death” (*Romans 8:13, Colossians 3:5*), “put off” (*Ephesians 4:22, Colossians 3:8-9*). The required response is to refuse self and reject sin outright. At other times, such aggressive action may only serve to stir up self more rather than subdue it. It may be more fitting then to simply act without fuss or fanfare. Such self-denial is equally drastic though not as dramatic.

The core of the self-life is self-pleasing. *Romans 15:1-3* tells us that we are not to please ourselves just as Christ did not please Himself, but to please others for their good and edification. Anything that gives precedence to self-pleasing promotes the self-life. Self-gratification is a most subtle and deadly enemy of the spiritual life. The only effective antidote to self-pleasing is self-denial. The phrase ‘denying himself’ is only used by Jesus in relation to the cross and discipleship in the gospels (*Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23*). What does it mean to deny myself? It is not putting down but refusing to please or gratify myself.

It is interesting to note that the Greek word for ‘self-willed’ used in *Titus 1:7* of what an overseer should not be, and in *2 Peter 2:10* of unjust sinners, really means pleasing one's self. A self-willed person is not only arrogant and assertive on the outside, but also driven by the need to please himself on the inside. It is the prime spiritual disqualification.