

Self-denial is a spiritual discipline

For some of us, our natural self likes knowing where we are going, how long we will be there and what we will do when we get there. We like having a sense of control over our day, our schedule, our life. The Spirit of God speaks to people like this; assuring them that they can trust God even when it seems He is leading them into the unknown. As Christians we can surrender ourselves and our loved ones to God, knowing that He is good. Psalm 23 reminds us “He is the Good Shepherd” and we can trust Him.

Self-denial is a way of coming before God; affirming that we believe He is good and there we do not need to demand our own way. When we demand to know in advance the ‘where’ and the ‘why’ and the ‘what for’ of future paths we are resisting faithful surrender. The will of God may take us where we do not want to go and ask of us what seems too big. The will of God does not always grow naturally out of our wishes and desires. Jonah is a good example; God called him to go to Nineveh – a place he did not want to go (Jonah 1:2, 3). Moses did not like public speaking, yet this is what God called him to do. Gideon did not feel courageous, yet God called him to take a bold and courageous stand. Self-denial is a spiritual discipline, an exercise of faith that shapes us and strengthens our relationship with God.

In the kingdom of God, abundant life involves surrender; losing our life so that we might find it, dying so that we might live. We sing of this, “Teach us how to gain by loss” (SASB #51). Jesus said, “Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me” (John 12:24-26). When Jesus said, “Hate your life” He did not literally mean hate your life. He is teaching us that the only way to succeed at living in His Kingdom is to put Him first, to seek cooperation with divine order above all things and in all things. Disciples of Jesus follow Jesus; they orient the way they think and live to become like Jesus who was obedient unto death. Jesus Christ said, “not my will Father but thine be done.” Self-denial is ‘seeking first the kingdom of God’ (Matthew 6:32, 33). It is surrendering our resistance and trusting the goodness of God.

Jesus showed us a life of self-denial and whole-hearted devotion to God. He demonstrated what it looks like for a person to sacrifice self-interests in order to love God and other people. He did this supremely on the cross, but He did it in countless “little” ways each day of His life. At times He fasted from food or awoke before sunrise to pray, often He let people interrupt what He was doing and He had compassion on them. He was always ready for menial service like washing feet or cooking breakfast. Love motivated Jesus’ surrender to the Father. We practice self-denial as a means of strengthening our relationship with God.