

Call to Obedience #384
PO Box 299 Kokomo, IN 46903 USA
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The First Step after Conversion

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First steps are important. There is a first step for navigators, builders, and doctors. There's also a first step for the new Christian. The first step often shows the true nature of a man's heart. It gives us our first look at who we are and whose we are. It often reveals what we hold dear and in whose company we will travel from the cradle to the grave.

The first step, after conversion, is self-denial. Jesus said in Luke 9: 23, *If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.*

Self-denial is the first condition for following Jesus. It is not the goal, the glory of God is the goal, but there is no discipleship without following and there is no following without self-denial (Luke 14:27). If after conversion you do not begin to deny self, your spiritual life comes to an end, you are back where you were before - in the self-life. Now, by self-denial I do not mean going to church twice a day, engaging in church activities or abstaining from certain foods or wearing certain clothing. Self-denial means a total abandonment to God, **it is a life given to God**, from morning to night. Jesus said, *let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily.* A day has 24 hours, an hour has 60 minutes, a minute has 60 seconds. We need to deny self continually.

Again, the moment you stop denying self, you cease to be a disciple of Jesus; you cease to live in His presence. We can keep up our religious talk and habits, but without continual self-denial we are no longer under His Lordship. You cannot pick and choose with God. This is why we read in Matthew 10:38: *And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me.* That means that there is no place in heaven for him. Now, let me illustrate how self-denial always stands at the beginning of each work of God.

At one point I told my wife, "Sweetheart, I think I am done crossing the Atlantic. I have done it about 42 times. I'm getting too old for it." I also did not have the finances for it. As always, she nudged me to pray about it. Because I knew that in my own prayers I would be prejudiced towards not going, I called a man of God who had no opinion in the matter. As soon as I asked him, he said, "The Lord tells me that there is somebody over there who needs you." That settled it - I denied self and told my wife we would go. Then the Lord said, "Take your grandson with you also." So I had to come up with a third ticket. Soon we were in the Austrian Alps and the innkeeper handed me her cell

phone with a suicidal lady on the line. The three of us drove two hours through the mountains to get to her. I read scriptures, I prayed earnestly but she received no help. Then I asked my grandson to sing in his beautiful bass voice: *When peace like a river attendeth my way, When sorrows like sea billows roll....*As he sang, she joined in her language. Her hands went into the air, the glory and sweetness of the Lord came down and the devil was defeated. Jesus had said, "There is somebody over there who needs you." Self-denial came first.

We must never allow circumstances, preferences, reasons or excuses to prevent us from following Jesus. We are called to faith. But **we cannot come to faith without self-denial**. The self will not believe. It has to be crucified for faith to grow, to believe that God's strength is made perfect in weakness. **We cannot come to love, to God's unlimited resources, without self-denial**. My trip was paid back soon after our return and of all the 42 that flight was the easiest I ever had! *God is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him*. That means not only seeking Him for Himself but also for His will.

On another occasion I was studying, praying and preparing the Sunday sermon on Saturday. Saturdays I would generally shut myself in, away from my family, except for the meals. As I was praying, I looked out the window and saw my wife struggling to till the garden. The Lord said to me, "You go out and till the garden." The self of me said, "But I am called to preach, to pray, to prepare a sermon." But Jesus repeated, "Go and till the garden for her." You can do all the studying and all the praying and all the preparing without God being in it. Friend, nothing matters but the will of God moment by moment. Do you know that when the tines of the tiller began to turn over, I was on my way to a great anointing for the Sunday service? Had I not denied self and obeyed God, my message would have been like sounding brass and tinkling cymbals.

Another time a sister asked me to visit her husband who was an alcoholic and in an institution. She expected me to go and save his soul. I did not want to go because I couldn't do what she asked me to do - I cannot save anybody, only Jesus can. But I denied self. The man quickly rejected me. He told his wife that he never wanted to see that preacher again. But a few weeks later, Jesus said, "Go back and see this man." Self said, "Don't you know that you've been rejected, what are you going back there for?" I had to deny self again and go back. In five minutes the man gave his heart to Jesus. **Victory always comes through the cross**. As we deny self and follow Jesus, we understand what Paul meant when he said in 2 Corinthians 3:18, that in this way *we go from glory to glory even as by the spirit of the Lord*.

So you see the first step after conversion is self-denial. This is what Jesus meant when He said *take up your cross daily*. It is only with hands of self-denial and obedience that we can embrace the cross, that we receive all that is ours (Mark 10:28-30). Once you are on this way, life is sweeter, brighter, better... This is the way of the Lord.

It is only natural for a pastor to seek a larger church. Self wants to look important, to be recognized. But God seldom leads this way. Every church I have ever pastored was less than half the size of the previous one. I had to say 'no' to all the bigger churches. The last one I was called to had only two men, four women and four children. But because God led us, our cup has been running over and the new wine has been spilling over onto our saucers. Wherever the cross is, there will be the power and the glory. Only His will matters.

This is why Jesus told us to pray *thy will be done*. The path to His will is self-denial, for self will never take one step after Jesus. Someone said that **the missing link which connects us to a continuous life as an overcoming Christian is self-denial**. Life only comes out of death (John 12:48; Gal. 2:20). But now we also need to know that self-denial requires discipline. You say that is legalism. To me it is love. Jesus said, *"if you love me keep my commandments* (John 14:15)." Jesus denied self every second for 33 years. The more you love Jesus, the more willing you are to discipline yourself, to deny self, to become a conqueror. Without discipline you cannot become a doctor, a pilot, a lawyer or a dairy farmer. As a farmer you have to milk the cows early each morning no matter what the weather is or how you feel, or the cows will die. Christian friend, you will come to spiritual death if you don't discipline yourself to pray, to witness, to sacrifice, to seek His will and do it. Jesus was the most disciplined man who ever lived on the earth. For a Christian to think that he can aimlessly float about all his life in a religious bubble of complacency and expect to arrive in heaven is the most despicable absurdity.

The first step after conversion is self-denial. If you don't stick with it, your light will go out. **There is no other way to begin.**

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