

Essay XXII

"Self-Denial and True Benevolence"

by

Jacob Catlin

At the head of all that is experimental and practical in religion stands the important doctrine of *self-denial*, which is manifested in acts of pure benevolence, or *holiness*. Holiness, as we have found, comprises the whole moral character of God, and it equally comprises all that is morally excellent in man, for "love is the fulfilling of the law." Pure love, or benevolence, is holiness, and to understand its nature and operations is to understand the nature of true religion. Errors concerning the nature of holiness, or true benevolence, involve a general system of error respecting both doctrine and practice.

The contrast to holy love is selfishness, and it is easy to see that the principle of selfishness is subversive not only of the law but of the gospel. Had Christ acted on the selfish principle, he would never have come down from heaven to die for sinners. And had all mankind acted on the selfish principle, no one would ever have been a believer and follower of Christ; for his testimony is, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." The selfish principle stands directly opposed to every doctrine which has been exhibited, and which will be exhibited in the system of truth before us. Of course, self-denial is the basis of all doctrinal and practical religion. The essence of the whole is pure benevolence, or holy love--pure, impartial, disinterested affection.

But it may still be inquired, "What is self-denial?" It is a denial of self-interest. It is that holy disposition of heart that was most clearly manifested by the humiliation, sufferings, and death of the Saviour for sinners. No verbal definition of self-denial and true benevolence can present the subject to our minds more clearly than it is done by the examples of the blessed Redeemer. Acting in the capacity of a man, he evidently sought not his own glory but the glory of him that sent him. Christ evidently pleased not himself. *He went about doing good* both to the bodies and souls of men, rather than seeking any private benefit. He labored and suffered not for his own private advantage, but for the honor of God and for the salvation of perishing sinners. For them he lived *as a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief*. And for them he died the accursed death of the cross. He made himself an offering and a sacrifice for sin.

Here we discover an astonishing instance of self-denial and pure benevolence. The marvelous condescension of the Saviour in descending from his infinite dignity in heaven to the death of the cross is stated by the Apostle expressly as an example of self-denial, which we are required to imitate: "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross" [Phil. 2:5-8]. In this statement we discover the nature of self-denial and true benevolence.

Self-denial is taught not only by the examples but by the precepts of Christ. "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" [Matt. 16:24]. "He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" [John 12:25]. "If any man comes to me and" (comparatively speaking) "hates not his father and mother, and wife and children, and brethren and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple" [Luke 14:26]. "And whoever does not bear his cross and come after me cannot be my disciple" [Luke 14:27].

The doctrine of self-denial is also strongly expressed by the beloved Apostle John: "By this we know love, because he laid down his life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" [1 John 3:16]. To lay down our lives for the good of our fellowmen, or for the defense and support of the cause and kingdom of Christ, is one of the strongest expressions of self-denial.

In the illustration of this important duty, let it be understood that by self-denial is not meant a malevolent disposition towards ourselves nor a disregard of our own interest and welfare. All that is meant by it is that we be willing to make sacrifices of our own interest and welfare, and even of our own lives, as cases may require, for the sake of the greater interest of others or the *greater general good*. Self-denial does by no means imply that we have no regard to ourselves, but that we impartially regard others as we do ourselves. This is the very idea of the doctrine under consideration, and this is according to the spirit of the divine law.

In the scriptures we find particular laws and statutes, almost innumerable. But all are comprehended in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" [Matt. 19:19]. "Love works no ill to his neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" [Rom. 13:10]. Selfishness, on the other hand, naturally *works ill to his neighbor*, and is therefore the violation of the whole law. Every step we take on the selfish principle exposes our neighbor's interest or character. And what is infinitely more to be dreaded is that it is reproachful to the ever blessed God, even to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. It is reproachful to the law, to the gospel, and to the grace of God. Thus evident it is that holy love appears and operates in works of self-denial and pure disinterested benevolence.

The doctrine of self-denial, though derided by the wise men of the world as an affectation of being righteous overmuch, is clearly a fundamental and practical doctrine of the holy scriptures. It is also a plain dictate of reason. It is a doctrine which distinguishes between virtue and vice, and which commends itself to the consciences of all the friends of truth and godliness. This holy principle is celebrated by the Apostle under the name of charity, and it is called *the bond of perfectness*. Without charity or holy love, the highest attainments in wisdom and knowledge, the most splendid gifts of utterance, the gift of miracles and prophecy, the greatest possible liberality to the poor, and even the sacrifice of life in the best of all causes, are accounted as nothing. Charity [love] alone contains the essence of religion: "Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" [1 Cor. 13:4-7]. It is added that "loves never fails" [v. 8]. It shall abide forever, while faith and hope shall terminate in vision and fruition.

From the view of what the Apostle denominates charity [love], "which is the bond of perfectness,"

it is evident that self-denial is a leading feature in the real Christian's character. He *suffers long* and is kind. "*Love seeks not her own.*" Christian self-denial, which consists in a *denial of selfishness*, consists in regarding all rational, and even all sensitive beings, with a candid and impartial eye, and in regarding all interests and objects according to their intrinsic value and importance. Private good is by no means to be neglected because it *is private* and not public good: "He who provides not for his own, and especially for them of his own house," whether it be in spiritual or temporal things, "has denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel" [1 Tim. 5:8]. Private good is as necessary to the man of true benevolence as to others. But in his view, its importance does not consist in its being his own private good so much as in its being a *real good*. If it comes to himself, he rejoices and is thankful for it. And if it comes to others, he also rejoices and is thankful; for, in some good measure, he loves his neighbor as himself.

On the subject of self-denial, we may further observe that a very great and distinguishing part of this duty consists in love to our enemies. On the selfish principle (which is now, as it was in the time of Christ's ministry, a very popular principle), the moral law is "you shall love your neighbor," that is, your friendly neighbor, "and hate your enemy." But on the principle which is now advocated, the moral law as uttered by the mouth of the Saviour is, "Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you" [Matt. 5:44]. This important command is enforced irresistibly by the example of our Heavenly Father: "For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" [Matt. 5:45]. All, both bad and good, friends and enemies, share alike and in common the bounties and blessings of a merciful providence.

Yea, the divine example of love to enemies extends further. For, says Paul, "God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" [Rom. 5:8]. We are required to love the most vile and ungrateful, to "do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return" [Luke 6:35]. "But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them" [Luke 6:32]; "Do not even the tax collectors do the same?" [Matt. 5:46]. The duty of love to enemies gives ample support to the doctrine of self-denial. And this love is most evidently holy and disinterested.

By this love, wherever it appears, Christians are clearly distinguished from the ungodly world. By this Christ distinguished himself as the holy and merciful Saviour; for so ardent was his love to his enemies that he spent his last breath, under their torturing hands, in prayer for them: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" [Luke 23:34]. Is it possible that any man who has heard of the life and death of the blessed Redeemer should reject for a moment the great doctrine of self-denial and love to enemies? In this, above all things, Christ was distinguished; and "if any man has not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his" [Rom. 8:9].

By all that has been said, however, respecting self-denial and love to enemies, it is not to be understood that we are to have *delight in them*, or to love them with a love of complacency [inclination to please]. To love them with delight or complacency would exclude the idea of self-denial, and would imply that we ourselves possess the same odious character and are pursuing the same wicked courses. The holy Psalmist, speaking of the enemies of God, expressed in the strongest terms his utter abhorrence of them: "Do I not hate them, O LORD [Yahweh], who hate You? And do I not loathe those who rise up against You? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies" [Ps. 139:21,22].

The Lord also has infinite abhorrence of the wicked. "But the wicked and the one who loves violence His soul hates" [Ps. 11:5]. "God is a just judge, and God is angry with the wicked every day" [Ps. 7:11]. Innumerable are the expressions of his anger and hatred, though his very name and nature are *love*. Christ, whose benevolence was infinite and whose love to his enemies was wonderful [astonishing], was affected with a holy indignation against stupid [obstinate] unbelievers: "And He marveled because of their unbelief" [Mark 6:6]; "And when he had looked round about on them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts . . ." [Mark 3:5]. He felt and expressed the highest indignation against those sinners for whom, in infinite benevolence and mercy, he laid down his life on the cross.

Thus we see a wide difference between a love of complacency [inclination to please] and a holy disinterested love of benevolence. Complacency is a holy affection when it has for its object a holy character. But when it has for its object a wicked character, it is a wicked affection. Accordingly, we find that love to the Christian brethren, viewing them in their true character, is an evidence of a saving change of heart. "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren" [1 John 3:14]. Can we but only be assured that we delight in those very things in which the true Christian character consists, we may be well satisfied that we have passed from death unto life. Cordial complacency and fellowship with real Christians cannot exist in the unregenerate heart. But if our love of Christians be an interested and selfish affection, [then] it is no evidence of real religion nor of a holy complacency. It is, on the contrary, an evidence that we are strangers to the nature of true religion, and liable to perish in a vain delusion.

REMARKS

1. In attending to this subject, which exhibits the moral nature of the religion which we profess as consisting essentially in self-denial and holy love or benevolence, we are strongly impressed with the idea that such doctrine as this is certainly from God. As the Apostle says, such doctrine as this IS NOT AFTER MAN. It is most directly opposed to the views and feelings of every natural heart. From whence then could it proceed but from the inspiration of the Almighty?
2. The doctrine of self-denial and true benevolence is altogether a *practical doctrine*. Let it be ever so well investigated and ever so firmly believed, it can be of no advantage to us unless it be put in daily practice. To what purpose can it be *to hold the truth in unrighteousness*? It will but aggravate our damnation. "For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them" [2 Pet. 2:21]. "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them" [John 13:17]. Amen.

Essay XXII, "Self-Denial, and True Benevolence," from *A Compendium of the System of Divine Truth* by Jacob Catlin (Hartford: George Goodwin & Sons, 1818). **Note:** The text has not been modified except for some very light editing for clarity. Also, punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized, long paragraphs have been divided, and the NKJV has been used for numerous quotations.