

## What Did Jesus Mean about Self-Denial?

Jesus said to his disciples,

*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*

Matthew (16:24), Mark (8:34), and Luke (9:23) all agree that Jesus told his followers that they must deny themselves. Mark and Luke include the whole crowd as well as the disciples in the audience. We've heard these instructions before, but what kind of denial was Jesus talking about?

### Is denial giving up a treat?

Was it the kind of denial we practice when we give up chocolate or one of our favorite foods for Lent? Was it the kind of denial that has us pass up a treat or a fun time on principle, to show that we can live without it? Was it the kind of good feeling we get when we take money we could have spent on an expensive trip and send it to a good cause?

I don't think so. If denying ourselves something we like is supposed to make us care more for others, it actually doesn't work that way. In fact, Psychology Today (September 11, 2013) reports a study that says denying ourselves a treat actually increases our appetite and happiness. That's because we enjoy the treat even more when we indulge in it the next time. So much for denial as a sacrifice.

Jesus doesn't say that followers should deny themselves luxuries, or a comfortable life, or even things they enjoy. He says that they must deny themselves (*ἀπαρνησάσθω ἑαυτὸν*). This denial is the same original Greek word that the gospels use when they describe the way Peter denied Jesus when he was arrested.

### What did Peter say when he denied Jesus?

What did Peter do? He had three chances to affirm or deny his relationship with Jesus, and each time he spoke more strongly. As Matthew reports it,

*Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. "You also were with Jesus of Galilee," she said. But he denied it before them all. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said.*

*Then he went out to the gateway, where another girl saw him and said to the people there, "This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth." He denied it again, with an oath: "I don't know the man!"*

*After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away." Then he began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them, "I don't know the man!" Immediately a rooster crowed.*

*(Matthew 26:69–74)*

Lying and cursing and swearing do not make Peter a good role model for behavior in a crisis, but he does show how serious a denial can be.

## What is absolute denial?

The form of the word in Greek for denial (**ἀπαρνησάσθω**) that Jesus is using is not simple denial, but denial with a prefix (**ἀπ**) that makes it especially intense (**ἀπαρνησάσθω**). This emphasis is like the difference between bad and worst or good and best. This kind of denial can mean:

- to deny strongly, with the implication of rejection
- claiming no knowledge of or relationship to someone
- affirming that one has no acquaintance or connection with a person
- to reject, deny with repudiation, or disavow
- to disown or renounce claim to someone or something
- to deny utterly, to abjure

This is the kind of denial that severs family ties, ends relationships, and leads to one person saying of another, “I never knew you.” It is also the form of denial that Jesus uses when he says:

*Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven. (Matthew 10:32–33)*

This denial is absolute, total, and complete.

When Jesus uses this intense form of denial as an action toward oneself (**ἀπαρνησάσθω ἑαυτὸν**), it is interpreted to mean:

- to forget one’s self, lose sight of one’s self and one’s own interests
- act in a wholly selfless manner
- to give up one’s own personality

How can Jesus expect us as his followers to distance ourselves so completely from the people we used to be? How can we walk away from our identities, the personalities we’ve developed over the years, the people we’re used to being? It is clearly not easy.

## Denial of our old life begins a new life

Paul talks about the new life we have with Jesus in his letter to the Romans:

*Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. (Romans 6:3–4)*

In this new life, we walk away from the life we have lived and the kind of people we have been, to become someone who is reborn to be like Christ. We’re still the same person on the outside with the same name, body, home, relatives, jobs and hobbies.

However, instead of doing everything for our own motives, we have accepted and live out of the mind and motives of Jesus. This is a new life in the strongest sense of the words, since even though the externals are the same, the person inside has had a complete change of perspective.

Ruth Burrows, one of my favorite authors, explains very clearly how this change of mind, into the mind of Jesus, can work for us today:

*By nature we stand on the viewpoint of self and judge other people, things, what is happening from that stand. Faith demands that we deliberately get off that stand and move to another, the viewpoint of Jesus, and then, how different everything looks.*

*This needs constant effort, constant readjustment. Unless we undertake this battle against our subjectivity—how we feel, how things look to use, and so forth—and choose to stand on Jesus and live our lives in his vision, we shall never get anywhere. And yet, how few do this day in day out until it is second nature, their own nature. These indeed, have put on the mind of Christ. (Burrows, *Essence of Prayer*, p22)*

Burrows says that

*accepting the friendship and companionship of Jesus ... is a decision to shift the center of our lives from ourselves to him, to forgo self-interest and make his interests, his will, our sole concern. (Burrows, *Essence of Prayer*, p21)*

### **Who do we need to become?**

Many of us undertake roles in life, in our jobs and in our relationships, that require a personality that we need to learn and not what we would be naturally. My therapist once said, “I’m a much nicer person as a therapist than I am as a human being.” Those of us who act as ministers know that we put ourselves into a caring role, leaving our personal reactions aside when we interact pastorally. Those in sales or customer service jobs know that their professional role requires them to put on a personality that is focused in the people they are helping. In professional roles, we can “become” a kind of person who acts out of personality traits that may not be our first choice in other circumstances.

What it takes to make the shift into a person more like Jesus is much more than asking “What would Jesus do?” It requires getting to know him so well that we can develop into the kind of person that he is. Peter talks about this in his first letter when he says,

*As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.” (1 Peter 1:14–16)*

We need a whole lot of help to do this, in prayer and by welcoming the Holy Spirit into our daily lives, but this is what Jesus asks and expects of his followers. May we all be willing to take up the challenge.

### **Reference**

Burrows, Ruth. *Essence of Prayer*. London: Burns & Oates, 2010.