

To Test Your Sincerity

A Sermon by Richard Baxter

Beloved hearers, I have now before me as great a sin and danger to deter you from (even selfishness and its effects) and as great a Duty to offer to your entertainment (even self-denial) as any (save one) that I am acquainted with in the world. The raising up the soul to God is indeed the greatest work: But the mortifying of the flesh, and the Denying of self, is surely the next to it, being a real part of the change. You hear Ministers tell you of the odiousness, and danger, and sad effects of sin: but of all the sins that ever you heard of, there is scarce any more odious and dangerous than this, and yet I doubt there are many that never were much troubled at it, nor sensible of its malignity. My principal request therefore to you is, that as ever you would prove Christians indeed, and be saved from sin and damnation that follows it; take heed of this deadly sin of selfishness, and be sure you be possessed with true self-denial: and if you have it, see that you use and live upon it.

And for your help herein, I shall 1. Tell you how your self-denial must be tried; and 2. How it must be exercised; and 3. I shall give you some further Reasons to persuade you to it; and 4. Some Directions for the procuring and strengthening it. The trial of your self-denial may be performed by the help of the Signs that have been given you before. In the ten particulars mentioned in the beginning, you may see what is selfishness, and what is self-denial. But for your further satisfaction, I shall only tell you in a few words, how the least measure of true self-denial may be known. And, in one word, that is thus: Wherever the Interest of Carnal self is stronger and more predominant habitually than the Interest of God, of Christ, of everlasting life, there is no true self-denial or saving grace: But where Gods Interest is the strongest, there self-denial is sincere. If you further ask me, How this may be known? Briefly thus.

1. What is it that you Live for? what is that Good which your mind is principally set to obtain? and what is that End which you principally design and endeavour to obtain, and which you set your heart on, and lay out your hopes upon? Is it the Pleasing and glorifying of God, and the everlasting fruition of him? Or is it the Pleasing of your fleshly mind in the

fruition of any inferior thing? Know this, and you may know whether Self or God have the greatest interest in you. For that is your God, which you Love most, and Please best, and would do most for.

2. Which do you set most by? the means of your Salvation, and of the Glory of God; or the Means of providing for Self and Flesh? Do you set more by Christ and Holiness, which are the way to God? or by Riches, Honour, and Pleasures, which gratify the flesh? Know this, and you may know whether you have true Self-denial?

3. If you are truly self-denying, you are ordinarily Ruled by God, and his word and spirit, and not by Carnal Self. Which is the Rule and Master of your lives? whose Word and Will is it ordinarily that prevails? When God draws, and self draws, which do you follow in the tenor of your life? Know this, and you may know whether you have true Self-denial.

4. If you have true Self-denial, the drift of your lives is carried on in a successful opposition to carnal Self, so that you not only refuse to be ruled by it, and love it as your God, but you fight against it, and tread it down as your enemy: So that you go armed against Self in the course of your lives, and are striving against Self in every duty; and as others think, it then goes best with them, when Self is highest, and pleased best; so you will know that it then goeth best with you, when Self is lowest, and most effectually subdued.

5. If you have true Self-denial, there is nothing in this world so dear to you, but on deliberation you would leave it for God. He that hath anything which he loveth so well that he cannot spare it for God, is a selfish and unsanctified wretch. And therefore God hath still put men to it, in the trial of their sincerity, to part with that which was dearest to the flesh. Abraham must be tried by parting with his only Son. And Christ makes it his standing rule, [He that forsaketh not all that he hath, cannot be my Disciple] Luke 14. 33. Yet it is true that flesh and blood may make much resistance in a gracious heart; and many a striving thought there may be, before with Abraham we can part with à Son, or before we can part with wealth or life: But yet on deliberation self-denial will prevail, and there is nothing so dear to a gracious soul, which he cannot spare at the will of God, and the hope of everlasting life. If with Peter we should flinch in a temptation, we should return with Peter in weeping bitterly,

and give Christ those lives that in a temptation we denied him. For Habitually God is dearest to the soul.

6. In a word, true self-denial is procured by the Knowledge and Love of God, advancing him in the soul to the debasing of self. The illuminated soul is so much taken with the Glory and Goodness of the Lord, that it carrieth him out of himself to God, and as it were estrangeth him from himself, that he may have communion with God; and this makes him vile in his own eyes, and abhor himself in dust and ashes; He is lost in himself; and seeking God, he finds himself again in God. It is not a Stoical Resolution, but the Love of God and the Hopes of Glory that make him throw away the world, and look contemptuously on all below, so far as they are mere provision for the flesh.

Search now, and try your hearts by these evidences, whether you are possessed of this necessary grace of self-denial. O make not light of the matter Sirs, and presume not of it, till you find good grounds. For I must tell you that self is the most treacherous enemy, and the most insinuating deceiver in the world. It will be within you when you are not aware of it, and will conquer you when you perceive not your selves much troubled with it, and of all other vices is both the hardest to find out, and the hardest to cast out; the hardest to discover, and the hardest to cure. Be sure therefore in the first place that you have self-denial: and then be sure that you use it and live in the practice of it