

The Sum of the Christian Life

We began this series with a brief look at the life and ministry of the great Protestant Reformer, John Calvin, which gave us an example from church history of a man who sacrificially gave of himself for others. This is exactly what Paul is teaching us in Romans 12:1-2. In fact, it would be right to say—as John Calvin once said—that the sum of the Christian life is the denial of self. God is intent on seeing us grow to be more like Jesus Christ, our Savior, and one of the ways in which this happens is in our sacrificial service to God and to others. When we express the mercy of God in our service to the needs of others, we are always blessed (Matt. 5:7).

For many people it may seem counterintuitive to think that our lives are more blessed when we seek to give ourselves sacrificially to others. The “wisdom” of the world tells us that we should “look out for number one” or “if you don’t look out for yourself, no one else will.” Living sacrificially doesn’t mean that you fail to rightly care for yourself, but it does mean that we should seek to reorient our priorities away from focusing on ourselves and toward obeying God and serving others. This is the way that God made us and it’s the way in which we will, ultimately, find our greatest joy and fulfillment (John 15:1-17). We’re all made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) who, himself, perfectly taught us to obey him and sacrifice for others. We see both perfect obedience and the greatest sacrifice when we look at the life and sacrificial death of Jesus Christ for sinners.

When wrongly considered, seeking to give ourselves as “living sacrifices” can seem dreary and depressing. How can my life be joyful by serving others in obedience to God? We can begin to think that the Christian life is just about keeping a lot of rules. And yet, one of the amazing truths that a Christian discovers is that, as we’re more and more exposed to God’s word and seeking, by grace, to obey the commands that are given, we begin to see the beauty and the love that’s expressed in those commands. We discover that God’s commands are given because they’re always best for us in every situation! God, who made us, knows perfectly what we need. Discovering this truth will help us to see that obedience to God should never be a burden. It’s true that God’s word challenges us and will take us out of our comfort zone, at times. When this happens, obedience to God may not seem joyful, but rather, something that’s terrible. And yet, the more we grow in our knowledge of God, we’ll find that his commands will increasingly be a delight. The apostle John was getting at this very thing in 1 John 5:3:

“For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.” When, as Christians, we begin to regularly deny ourselves and focus more on God and others, we start to see many things in a different light. I want to conclude this series with just a few thoughts about the ways

in which self-denial and the focus on God's word—which includes loving and serving others—will benefit us and honor God.

—We can have the right attitude, as well as godly actions of love toward others, when we don't think so highly of ourselves. Our attitude should be, "Except for the grace of God there would be nothing truly good in my life."

—We're better prepared to praise God and give thanks to him for whatever comes into our lives when we realize the biblical truth that we don't deserve anything good; all our blessings are not earned by our obedience, but rather, our blessings are merited in Jesus Christ.

—We can look forward with appropriate anticipation to Lord's Day worship: When we began to catch a glimpse of the "mercies of God" to us, how can we not want to run to our local church, gather with like-minded believers and give God the worship he deserves?

—We can, without guilt, enjoy our many blessings and be thankful to our God who gives us every blessing in Jesus Christ who said:

"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it." May it be so for us.

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