

# SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

IS SELF-DENIAL OBSOLETE?

Dr. Ernest T. Campbell



THE RIVERSIDE  
CHURCH IN THE  
CITY OF NEW YORK

March 2, 1969



Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2012 with funding from  
Princeton Theological Seminary Library

## IS SELF-DENIAL OBSOLETE?

"It doesn't cost to follow Jesus Christ, it pays!" Years ago at a Youth Conference I heard a man talk like that. And I've heard subtle variations on the same theme many times since. "It doesn't cost to follow Jesus Christ, it pays." There is something troubling about an observation like this. It runs counter to Scripture and experience. For example, what do we make of this word of Jesus? "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Or that word of one of the earliest Christians, "Whatever gain I had I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ." (Phil 3:7,8b) And what of this candid testimony of one of our contemporary Christians, Bishop Otto Dibelius: "Jesus Christ has not made life easy for me. On the contrary, it would have been more comfortable to be without Him than to live with Him. He puts burdens on the soul, which one would rather let pass unheeded." <sup>1</sup>

In the Lenten Season our ambivalence towards sacrifice becomes more and more disturbing. Here we sit on cushioned pews, in a heated church, facing into a handsomely carved chancel that centers in a smooth and gleaming cross. Even our Roman Catholic brethren have let the side down, for Pope Paul VI just a few years ago reduced the Lenten Fast from forty days to two. Now abstinence and fasting is enjoined on the faithful only for Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. And where do we go to find anywhere in Protestantism a man who is under a consistent and rigorous discipline?

Let me assure you that I share this confusion with you. I have not logged much sacrifice for Jesus Christ. I haven't missed a meal in years! I've lived in comfortable quarters; we have been a two-car family anytime we wished to be since 1954; there is no hair shirt in my wardrobe, no hardtack on my table. We are all in

this together. In truth Jesus Christ has cost most of us next to nothing. Alike we are haunted by His word, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Mat. 16:24-25)

Perhaps self-denial has become obsolete. Perhaps we are to see the summons to sacrificial living as a mere phase through which earlier generations of Christians had to pass. They bore with the hostilities of a pagan empire the way Daniel Boone suffered the hardships of the American wilderness. And we can say of both, "Thank God we live now and not then." We have outgrown the need for self-denial. The Christian faith has come to us modulated from a minor key to a major. We have transcended this primitive notion. We have widened the narrow way and enlarged the gate that leads to life. In short, we have gained the best of both worlds, all this and heaven too!

If we cannot convince ourselves that self-denial is obsolete, perhaps we can argue ourselves into believing that self-denial has gone into temporary eclipse and that we would be capable of sacrificial living if the circumstance demanded it. We are not courting the catacombs, this would be pathological. But don't sell us short. We are not actively seeking to be ostracized or persecuted for the faith, but should the climate shift and the sky darken we will be ready! But when we talk this way about self-denial and sacrifice our hearts aren't really in it. Self-denial was not a phase nor is the need for it in eclipse. We know that suffering and self-denial belong to the Christian life. "If any man would come after, let him deny....take up." We do not judge this standard, this standard judges us!

A worthier response to Jesus' word would find us asking for an approach to self-denial that would have meaning for this day and place. When we start thinking this way our minds inevitably will run to at least three subjects: Money, time and appetites. Money and time in abundance are the marks of an affluent society,

and it is here that any thought about self-denial for western man in the Twentieth Century ought to begin. Money is the self in minted form. The desire for money can very easily become the master passion of one's life. We want insurance against an unknown and unknowable future. We want to be able to finance our yearnings. We want to be able to provide for those we love. Presently money moves from a means to an end and covetousness takes over. St. Francis Xavier, the noble Jesuit missionary said that "In the confessional men had confessed to him all sins that he knew and some that he had never imagined, but none had ever of his own accord confessed that he was covetous." 2

John Woolman points the way for us. In his Journals he naively and quietly noted that his tailoring establishment was becoming too large for him. He was no longer able to manage the business and his own soul. In what might be considered a rather un-American approach he referred all future customers to a competitor. This improved the fortunes of his competitor and enabled the Quaker to possess his spirit.

The use we make of money in an affluent society is as strong a clue as any to how well we know what self-denial means. The tendency is to live it up or save it up. And these come to the same thing in the end for savings are but delayed consumption. There is no surer way to keep our money from owning us than the practice of proportionate giving. It is unfortunate that our thoughts on stewardship usually come to us in the Fall. They belong to the Lenten Season, for what we give as Christians should be reckoned in the light of what God has given for us. What percentage of our money do we release to allow good things to happen in this world? And how did we arrive at this percentage?

People of the middle-class and up complain constantly about being strapped. But we are strapped not by authentic need but by what economists call secondary poverty. That is, we describe the new Hi-Fi, the new television set, the new car and the second home as

necessities and feel that our disposable income begins where these leave off. Such soft thinking can lead to gross imbalance. Richard Frost who teaches Political Science at Reed College observed recently that Americans spend 3 billion dollars yearly on house pets and 1.7 billion dollars for the Federal War on Poverty. We spend 55 million dollars on the care and feeding of migrant birds and but 40 million dollars on aid to migrant workers.

What shall we say about our disposable time? Once at a meeting of the Joyce Society, Thornton Wilder after a lengthy explication of a passage of Finnegan's Wake, was asked by a woman if all the labor he had expended was not a waste of time. Wilder blinked and then after a moment asked, 'Madam do you play bridge?' When the woman readily admitted she did, Wilder responded cheerfully, 'Madam between your way of wasting time and mine, allow me mine.' <sup>3</sup> A self-denying use of leisure time will see us preparing ourselves for greater usefulness to God and man. According to Arend van Leeuwen "Ninety-nine percent of the people irrespective of race play a passive as opposed to a creative role (in society) and even the creative section are passive with regard to ninety-nine percent of their civilization." <sup>4</sup> One reason why we remain passive, we tell ourselves, is because we are not qualified. But the sin of it is that we choose to remain unqualified in order to justify our non-involvement.

I was happy to learn the other day of a doctor and his wife who are flying to Africa at their own expense to work for a month in a hospital - he as doctor, she as nurse, and even one of the sons as orderly. There are business men retiring at an early age who should be thinking about sharing their knowledge and experience with their struggling counterparts in underdeveloped countries.

And self-denial will include a look at how well we control our appetites. This issue is not peculiar

to any particular society, it belongs to man from of old. Dr. Hudson who founded the Massanetta Bible Conference in Virginia was a lean, sparse man. Someone said he looked like an advertisement for a famine. A friend introducing him one day said, "Most of us have to wrestle with the world, the flesh and the devil, but Dr. Hudson has only to wrestle with the world and the devil." All of us have some wrestling to do here. Not because we believe with the Greeks that the body is bad and the spirit good, but because we will not yield to the equally dangerous American heresy that the body is everything and must be gratified at all cost. The question is not whether we have renounced the flesh but whether we have subordinated it. Gordon Allport of Harvard notes that "Unless one escapes the level of immediate biological impulse one's life is manifestly dwarfed and infantile." 5 In our society the clue centers in the word "moderation". The monastic option is neither inviting nor possible for most of us. But to be moderate in the midst of abundance, this is the aim.

I remember years ago a retreat at Buck Hill Falls for ministers and their wives. Most of us were positively awed by the thickness of the rugs, not to mention the thickness of the meat at that famous mountain resort. As the conference wore on our puritanically oriented consciences began to get the better of us. At the summing up session there were several who rose to say that there was something wrong with our being at such a place. (Most of us were making anywhere from \$2400-\$3200 per year and we were in strange country.) The thought was expressed that next time we should find a more spartan atmosphere. In a less opulent setting the wives could order and prepare the food and the men cut wood and build fires. The point almost carried until a wiser voice suggested that to be moderate in the midst of plenty was no less Christian than to be abstinent in the midst of little.

The question we ought to ask ourselves is: "Who

is boss?" Are we really in control of ourselves? Edwin Dahlberg takes at least one night each year, foregoing food and sleep to stay up for unbroken communion with God - sometimes aboard a ship on the high seas, sometimes in the trackless wastes of the desert, sometimes in a mountain cabin. He does it to prove to himself that he can override the clamors of his flesh.

Let me leave you not with answers but with questions that seem to grow out of the mandate of our Lord.

What if anything does my faith in Jesus Christ cost me?

What percentage of my income do I make available for God's work in the world. How did I arrive at this figure?

Do I accept uncritically the premise of our society that the Gross National Product, the Gross Corporate Product, the Gross Personal Product must go up each year?

Am I using my career to hide out from involvement in the burning issues of the day?

When was I last willing to take a stand that might jeopardize my popularity with my political, social or business "in" group?

In what specific ways have I demonstrated mastery over my body's appetites and passions?

Has my concern for the salvation of a friend ever led me to pray past a meal-time?

Do I deliberately remain uninformed about the sacrifices being made today by social workers, civil right leaders, missionaries, Peace Corps volunteers and others - in order that my indifference may go unchallenged?



What have I studied in recent years to further not my own career but my usefulness to others for Christ's sake?

Have I ever given thought to pulling up stakes and bidding farewell to conventional securities to serve the Lord in some field of critical need?

"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Praise God, the one who laid that word upon us, showed us the way Himself and gives us the power to follow. Amen.

#### FOOTNOTES:

1. Kerr, Hugh T., Mystery and Meaning in the Christian Faith, p. 45, The Ryerson Press, Toronto, 1958.
2. Rauschenbusch, Walter, Christianity and the Social Crisis, p. 74, Macmillan, New York 1907
3. From Richard H. Goldstone's Review of The Eighth Day, by Thornton Wilder, SATURDAY REVIEW, p. 28, April 1, 1967
4. van Leeuwen, Arend Theodore, Christianity in World History, p. 36, Edinburgh House Press, London, 1964
5. Allport, Gordon, The Individual and His Religion p. 53, Macmillan Co., New York, 1965





