



**"For I know that good does not dwell in me, that is, in my flesh. The willing is ready at hand, but doing the good is not. For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want."**

- Romans 7:18-19

# ASCETICISM & SELF DENIAL

We all want to do what's right, and we all want to strive for greatness, but we often fall short. Maybe we find ourselves confessing the same sins over and over, committing to change our ways, only to give in to the next temptation. God's grace and mercy aren't free; they came at the cost of Christ's blood, poured on the cross as expiation for our sins. It's easy to forget, and without reflecting on God's love for us, we can easily become lukewarm in our faith—something Jesus warns against in Revelation 3:16: "So, because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth."

What is going on? Why can't we say 'no'? Why are we content to keep going through the motions? The answer isn't simple, and the solution requires effort as each person must discern the root of the problem. Our culture and technology certainly prioritize convenience, but that doesn't necessarily make life easier for us. Instant gratification surrounds us—whatever we want is just a couple of clicks away. We don't need to leave the house or speak with anyone to get food. We don't need to learn to love another person when we can simply lust over pixels whenever we desire. Convenience is a problem.



## RUNNING THE RACE

**"Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one. Thus I do not run aimlessly; I do not fight as if I were shadowboxing. No, I drive my body and train it, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified." - 1 Corinthians 9:25-27**



If we can't say 'no', then our 'yes' means nothing. If we truly want to change—if we genuinely desire greatness—then we must take Christ's words in Luke 14:27 seriously: "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple." This requires us to practice self-denial. **Asceticism is not about self-loathing or mere self-improvement; rather, it is about removing the 'self' to focus on God.** It is an act of love, a willingness to deny even good things, especially when united to the cross of Christ. As St. Paul states in Colossians 1:24, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church."

**Self-denial is not comfortable—that is precisely why we resist it.** Yet, as Hebrews 12:11 reminds us, “At the time, all discipline seems a cause not for joy but for pain, yet later it brings the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who are trained by it.” Many saints, especially the early Desert Fathers like St. Simon the Stylite, embraced a life of radical aestheticism, undergoing great fasts and many acts of self-denial to live out Christ’s call to die to themselves. As Jesus declares in Mark 8:35, “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it.”

## LIVING A LIFE OF SELF-DENIAL

**“Whatever gains I had, these I have come to consider a loss because of Christ. More than that, I even consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things, and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ.” - Philippians 3:7-8**

Asceticism is not only an act of love but also a training ground for growing in virtue and strengthening our resolve against temptation. While many of us aren’t called to live as radically as St. Simon the Stylite, we are called to pick up our cross. Just as you wouldn’t sign up for a marathon without first training to run long distances, we shouldn’t jump into extreme acts of self-denial without preparation. We should also begin with prayer and discernment, allowing God to reveal what distractions, temptations, and sins need to be removed from our lives.

Throughout our day, there will always be small annoyances that God allows. These little trials, like traffic jams, are valuable crosses to embrace because we did not choose them ourselves.



**James 1:2-4 offers us encouragement in this regard:** “Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. And let perseverance be perfect, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” However, we can also perform little acts of self-denial throughout the day—such as forgoing cream or sugar in your coffee, passing on dessert, or skipping dressing on a salad.

As mentioned in a previous *Be Not Afraid*, we need community to help us—especially since we have an enemy who does not want us to succeed. Consider finding or creating a group at your parish to help encourage one another on growing in asceticism. Programs like *Exodus 90* are designed to foster that sense of community, providing support and motivation to keep going, even after setbacks.

## LET US PRAY

**“Fight the good fight of the faith.” - 1 Timothy 6:12**

Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name; Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and **lead us not into temptation**, but deliver us from evil.

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