

starter

self-denial

based on Mark 8:31 – 9:1

AIM

To explore meanings of, and motives for, self-denial for Jesus and his followers both 'then' and 'now'.

INTRODUCTION

Self-denial has been one of the features of the Christian life throughout church history, most obviously in the recorded lives of saints and religious communities. But it seems increasingly difficult to talk about self-denial these days. Perhaps this is because our society values individual freedom and material wealth, or because people can be so sensitive to the implication that they are not living up to expectations. But what are God's expectations of us?

GETTING STARTED

As a group share stories of self-denial in practice today.

TURNING TO THE BIBLE

Read Mark 8:31 – 33.

This story arises from an incident in which Jesus openly predicts his own death and resurrection, and Peter takes exception to what Jesus.

- Why do you think Peter gives Jesus a talking-to?
- Why would Jesus respond to Peter as vigorously as he does (verse 33)?
- Where else in the gospels is Satan mentioned? Does this give a clue?

Now read Mark 8:34 – 9:1.

At this point, Jesus seeks to speak to the whole crowd on the subject of self-denial, but the stimulus for this seems to be the initial incident between Jesus and Peter.

- There appears to be something important on Jesus' mind, arising in verses 31-33, that he wants to share widely. What do you think it is?

In verse 34 Jesus clearly states that, to be his followers, people must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him. The cross was regularly used by the Roman occupation forces to execute dissidents they considered dangerous.

- Do you think Jesus is calling people to take on the Romans, or is he speaking figuratively? What would it mean for people to take up their cross?
- People today sometimes talk about having a cross to bear. Do you think they are talking about the same thing that Jesus is here?
- In the light of considering this story, what is the essence of self-denial?

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RESPONDING

Jesus' call to self-denial is not easy to answer. So far as you feel able to, share the difficulties you experience in answering this call. How would you like other members of the group to pray for you?

Depending on the type of group, this may lead into a time of prayer.

EVALUATION

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

1. What was the most helpful thing?
2. What was the least helpful thing?
3. What would you like to try now?

THE NEXT STEP

If you want more starters please revisit the menu. There are main course written specifically for Lent; you may want to try one of these. There are other main course Bible studies available.

What else can we try?

Self-denial has been practised throughout church history by those seeking to reform themselves and to master the sin lurking at their door (to paraphrase Genesis 4:7). One view of sin is that it is an addiction. Twelve-step programmes, such as the one used by Alcoholics Anonymous, have a good record in helping people to reform themselves. As a group consider the merits of a twelve-step programme in supporting self-denial and how it might be adapted for use in your church. An example is given below.

1. We admitted we were powerless - that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we *understood Him*.
4. We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. We humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings.
8. We made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. We made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

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10. We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we *understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His Will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Acknowledgements

The Bible study was inspired while listening to a sermon by the Revd Michael Whitfield.

The twelve-step programme quoted is a generalised form of that used by Alcoholics Anonymous; see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelve-step_program .

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