

DYING TO SELF AND DISCOVERING SO MUCH MORE

Our pleasure-seeking society flaunts a self-centered outlook on life. But the Bible teaches that we're to die to ourselves and live for Christ and for others. How can we do that?

BY JAN JOHNSON

Would I say something or keep quiet? My friend had just bought a new specialty Bible (one with notes) and was showing me what she liked about it. But I couldn't hear her because I was mentally debating whether I would tell her that I had written many of that Bible's notes and introductory articles. When she asked me a question, I realized I was too busy listening to the argument in my mind to hear my friend. Convicted, I looked directly into her eyes, knowing that she wanted my attention. Loving her meant letting go of my self-congratulatory thoughts and listening carefully as she repeated her question.

To die to self is to set aside what we want in this moment and focus instead on loving God with everything we've got and valuing others as highly as we value ourselves (Matthew 22:37-39). This moves us away from self-centeredness and closer to becoming openhearted followers of Christ who care deeply for others. It's much easier to pay attention to the concerns, interests and needs of people (Philippians 2:3-4) when our own interests no longer consume us.

Jesus described the dying-to-self process (to "deny self" is the exact scriptural phrase) as part of following Him: "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me" (Matthew 16:24, NASB). But dying to self isn't bleak and terrible. Jesus continued: "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25, NASB).

JAN JOHNSON (JanJohnson.org) is a speaker and author of many books, including "Invitation to the Jesus Life" and "Abundant Simplicity."



In dying to self, we find genuine life by depending on God, who provides much more than we can imagine. Likewise, Jesus taught in John 12:24: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (NASB). Part of the life that we find and the fruit we bear is not only living a richer life with God but also becoming more generous to others, reaching out to them with love and joy.

Sometimes people mistake dying to self for death of self. But self-denial is not self-rejection. God treasures your divinely created self. He doesn’t want to obliterate the part of you that makes you uniquely you. God works within you and reshapes you into the person your renewed-in-Christ self is meant to be: not selfish with what you own, not concerned about how circumstances affect only you, and not crabby when others seem to get what you want.

What Dying to Self Looks Like

As we die to self, we no longer try to get our own way or try to get people to look up to us. We stop offering unasked-for advice, as if in self-importance we think we always know better than others. We let go of trying to make a good impression on others. We find freedom from the self-focused life Evelyn Underhill describes: “We mostly spend [our] lives conjugating three verbs: to want, to have and to do. Craving, clutching and fussing, we are kept in perpetual unrest.” Quite simply, when we die to self, we’re no longer obsessed with self.

Dying to self actually makes life easier because, for example, we can be content even when we’re overlooked. Several years ago I led a woman through a one-on-one, 10-week time of study, conversation and prayer about becoming a disciple of Jesus. When she announced in church that she had decided to give her life to Christ, she talked about the people who had influenced her. I thought she would mention my name, but she didn’t. I considered standing up to excuse myself so she would notice me! But I knew the Spirit, not me, had done a great work in her life. I also saw this as an exercise in dying to self by not squeezing myself into the spotlight.

Could I honor others above myself (Romans 12:10)? But this issue went even deeper: Could I be secure in God’s love without public recognition? Could I let God be in charge of my reputation? Was God’s approval enough for me? After this early exercise in dying to self, I eventually found myself relying on God more in small things. I was finding life—the companionship and partnership with God that I longed for.


A Next Step

Start simple, start small—knowing more significant challenges lie ahead. Ask God how you might deny yourself a little something every day: In our me-first, materialistic culture, it might mean something as down-to-earth as refraining from sweets or other junk foods harmful to you. Or not becoming defensive when ridiculed, humiliated or questioned. Or not buying the latest phone you really want because your current one is fine. As you follow through with these choices, watch how God meets your needs and you find life. You forget about the food as you engage someone in conversation; you find that someone else sticks up for you; you’re relieved you don’t have to struggle to learn how to use a new phone! These daily behind-the-scenes denials train us to be selfless in small ways so that when we find ourselves in bigger struggles of faith, we more easily set aside our self-focused desires and think about others instead.

One small death-to-self lifestyle choice God has led

“Sometimes people mistake dying to self for death of self. But self-denial is not self-rejection. God treasures your divinely created self. He doesn’t want to obliterate the part of you that makes you uniquely you. God works within you and reshapes you into the person your renewed-in-Christ self is meant to be.”

me into involves staying away from the women’s clothing racks when I shop at a certain discount store. The clothes are such deals—inexpensive and up-to-date! The first time I sensed God leading me to do this I paused in the aisle that led toward the clothes. If I stepped any closer, I knew I’d find something I supposedly needed. What if I skipped it just for today? I already have 10 times more clothes than many people in this world. So I walked away.

Since then, it’s become easier. Now it’s freeing not to clutter up my schedule and closet buying things I don’t need. These small self-denials train my character away from self-indulgence and result in giving me more time and resources to seek God and what He is doing in the lives of others (Matthew 6:33).  ©2011 JAN JOHNSON

BIBLE VERSES MARKED NASB ARE TAKEN BY PERMISSION FROM THE NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE, ©1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977 THE LOCKMAN FOUNDATION, LA HABRA, CALIF.