

Sanctification

The Exercise of Discipline – Part 1

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By our union with Christ and by the gift of the Holy Spirit, Christians are empowered to pursue holiness. This pursuit takes place as we maintain a consciousness acknowledgement of our dependence upon the power of God at work within us. We fill ourselves with the word of God. We pray for God's enlightenment and empowerment. And we obey.

But a survey of our lives reveals many, many areas where sin has run rampant. It is a mess. Where do I begin? How do I approach the pursuit of living in holiness?

1 Timothy 4:6-10 offers an answer.

6 If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed. 7 Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; 8 for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. 9 The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. 10 For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.

In a nutshell, the overall approach to the pursuit of godliness designated here is to train yourself. The text helps bear out what this involves. The word translated by the ESV as train comes from the Greek word *gumnatze*. You may be able to see that it resembles the English word gymnasium. This word comes from the realm of athletics and physical training. In fact Paul takes us right there by comparison. He says, "bodily training is of some value." Bodily training had value for seeking a prize in the arena of the athletic games which figured prominently in Roman society. The games demanded physical fitness and agility. So training was of the utmost importance to develop strength, stamina, balance, speed, and endurance. Before God the prize is the upward call of God in Christ. It is spiritual maturity it is holiness of life, our sanctification borne out in our living. Paul is drawing from the realm of the gym to urge Timothy on in his personal training to glorify God. It should urge us on as well.

Living in a society which held sport in high regard (as does our society) athletics made its way into the New Testament as an illustration not just once. Here Paul also refers to bodily training in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27.

24 Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. 25 Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. 26 So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. 27 But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

With these two texts in mind, let's start with a basic statement. Training for godliness involves exercising yourself (by the Spirit) according to a strategic regimen in order to excel in holiness. What does this training look like? Looking carefully at these texts and the comparison with the athletic arena, we can better understand what is involved in the godliness regimen.

1. It involves looking at yourself.

Godliness training is focused on you. Paul says, "train YOURSELF for godliness" (1 Tim 4:7)

Now, the life of a Christian is not to be so self-focused that it does not reach out and help others. But to help others, you must be gaining strength yourself. Paul specifically addresses the strong to help those who are struggling. In Galatians 6:1, he writes, "if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him."

When Melissa and I went South a few weeks ago, we flew. And the flight attendants were doing their normal pre-flight safety routine. And the attendant came over to me and said, "now if we should encounter any loss in cabin pressure and the oxygen mask drops down, be sure and put yours on first and THEN help your daughter."

It is not unusual for us to be captivated with the growth of another person—what they need to work on, where they are falling short, but Paul says our first concern needs to be with us. Until you are spiritual you aren't in a state to be able to help others.

2. It involves determined exercise.

Bodily training happens through exercise. You know what they say, "No pain, no gain." No exertion no improvement. It is so in the spiritual realm as well.

The exercises of training for godliness are reading and memorizing Scripture, preaching to yourself, actively regulating your thought-life, placing barriers between yourself and temptation, praying for spiritual knowledge and wisdom, praying for strength, saying, “no,” to sinful inclinations, resolving, and planning.

You exercise by pushing through resistance. Any and all of these exercises require moment-by-moment persistence against resistance. How many push-ups can you do? One? Two? There comes a point at which everything in your body is telling you, “no more!” But you need to do more to make progress.

You have to be determined. You will fall, but you need to get back up when you do. Proverbs 26:16 – the righteous falls seven times and rises again, but the wicked stumble in times of calamity.

Jonathan Edwards made the following resolution – “Resolved, never to give over, nor in the least to slacken, my fight with my corruptions, however unsuccessful I may be.” He knew inevitably he would fail, but he determined not to be overruled by whatever failure he committed.

3. It involves proper nourishment.

Athletic training involves a healthy and strategic diet. No one in training these days eats whatever their bodies and their tongues crave. There are foods that help build the body up and there are foods that bring the body down. There is also food for spiritual training. Look at verse 7 of 1 Tim 4: “have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths.” Such impedes training for godliness. On the other hand look at verse 6 where Paul says, “you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed.” The word there, *trained*, is different from *gumnatze*. This one actually means nourished. Why the ESV people did not use that I do not know.

2 Timothy 3:16 says that all scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for “training in righteousness.” Now the word for training here is not from the gym but from the nursery. It refers to basic training given to children—the fundamentals. You never outgrow the fundamentals.

To train yourself for godliness, you need massive doses of God’s word. It supplies your soul with nutrients necessary for training.

-----All scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.