

Sanctification

The Exercise of Discipline – Part 2

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Godliness sums up what it means to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, bearing fruit in every good work. The divine nature of which Christians are being made partakers is the communicable character of God. It is also expressed as “the fruit of the Spirit.” We pursue godliness by walking in the Spirit, by putting to death the deeds of the flesh in the power of the Holy Spirit. We do this by faith. We cause the word of Christ dwell in ourselves richly (we fill the tank). We pray for the Spirit’s power. And we will/we choose to obey. And then we give the glory for our obedience to God.

Now when we turn our attention to look at the mess that we are, we would well ask if there is some biblical guidance for plotting an overall approach to the task of pursuing holiness. I believe that is what we find when we turn to consider Paul’s emphasis on the exercise of discipline or what we might call the spiritual training regimen. Paul says Christians must train themselves for the purpose of godliness. For him this training is like unto the physical training through which athletes put themselves in order to be the best they can be athletically. Similarly, followers of Christ need to enter into training for the purpose of godliness. So we will consider two texts where observe this training motif.

1 Timothy 4:6-10

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.

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.

In light of these texts, we said last time that 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. We specified three aspects in the last session. They are: 1. Looking at yourself (focusing on your own weaknesses first.) 2. Exercise (exerting yourself to break through resistance.) 3. Proper nourishment (digesting sound doctrine.). In this session we will specify 4 additional aspects of the godliness regimen.

4. It involves strategy and purpose.

Athletic training by definition is strategic. People train with a goal to win. If the goal is to win by being the best version of you that you can be, then the training itself will be strategic. Paul writes, "I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air." There is a clear goal. There is a well-thought-out plan. The book of Proverbs extols the value of a plan. Proverbs 21:5 says, "The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to poverty."

How does this apply to the pursuit of holiness? It means you don't just sit there thinking you are going to be more holy by sitting there and that it is more than merely striving or trying. There is a goal. Thought is given to the pursuit. What needs to be pursued? Where am I weakest? What are my most obvious failures? What are the most glaring areas of need in my life? What aspects of weakness pose the greatest danger to God's glory, myself, and others? That is where I need to start. I must heed the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. I should look to the fruit of the spirit as Paul lists godly character in Galatians 5. I can seek input from others who know me. But I should train in those areas that are most needed.

5. It involves commitment and endurance.

Athletic training is life-dominating. You must devote copious amounts of time on a consistent basis. It demands a commitment every single day. No days off. Athletes who are serious about victory get up early and work hard. Holiness too must be pursued in that way. Paul says to run in a way to obtain the prize. Time with God and in his word is not a luxury you can afford to miss; it is the stuff of training. Jesus gave us the images of living for the glory of God as carrying a cross and walking a narrow and difficult path. And it is. We must be determined to lift that cross and orient all of life to the pursuit. In addition, training for godliness never comes to an end. Hebrews 12:1 says let us run with endurance the race that is set before us. Those who belong to Christ persevere to the end. And we do not end until we cross the finish line when we reach heaven itself.

6. It involves persistence without applause.

Athletic training is done behind the scenes. Very few people go to watch practice and training. The crowds wait for the game. But what is done behind the scenes on the practice field and in the weight room has everything to do with who wins.

Likewise, spiritual training is hidden from the eyes of most people. The training goes on day to day—reading and studying, praying, disciplining to memorize and meditating upon Scripture, controlling thoughts in your head. But these impact what people do see—the words you speak, the way you respond when someone behaves offensively, the expression on your face, whether you take the path down temptation row.

My illustration for this point comes from Clemson football coach Dabo Swinney. He talks all the time about loving the grind. The grind is all those daily unseen things that feed into strength in the midst of actual competition. He says he lives for the grind. The joy is in the everyday training. Christ-followers need to learn to love the everyday grind, the spiritual training. People may not see it but it is not to be seen by people. Think how Jesus said that we should not pray to be seen but should go in our closets to pray and our Father who is in heaven sees and he rewards.

7. It involves setting your hope in the right place.

The fuel for the hard work of training comes from hope. The runner is driven by a hope to break through the tape first. That image propels him or her to keep on when their body says, “no.” The boxer wants the referee holding up his hand and glove when the bout is over. That desire sustains him or her through countless hours of bodily discipline.

Paul writes the Corinthians, “Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.”

He writes Timothy, “to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the savior of all, especially of those who believe.”

Peter says we have an inheritance reserved in heaven. It is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. And brothers and sisters, we will lay hold of the holiness that we seek in fullness. We need to live each moment of training reminding ourselves of our hope.

All scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.