

## Avoiding Sin

### The Battle

\*There is a war in the soul of each of us. A great pull towards sin.

-**Prov. 9:17**-there is a sinful pleasure in the forbidden.

### The Basis of Our Victory

**Galatians 2:20**-The power of the Christian life is our attachment to Jesus Christ.

-Believers have union with Christ. In God's mind, we were with Christ on the Cross.

-His death still has powerful effect on our lives now. He lives within us.

-So, we live "by faith" in Him. Looking to His power, grace to empower our lives in righteousness.

### 4 Principles for Warring with Sin

1. *Don't be a Slave to Your Every Desire.*

-**Titus 3:3-8**; Going to the grocery store when you're starved is dangerous! Giving in to every impulse is too.

-foolish=culpable lack of understanding; allows desires to go unchecked.

-disobedient=he wants what he wants so badly, that he is willing to cross God's line to do it/get it.

-deceived=thinking this will give him satisfaction.

-enslaved, making himself a servant to his various strong desires and pleasures.

-The Blessing of Self-Control. **Titus 2:4,6,12; I Tim. 4:7. Prov. 25:28.**

-Self-control is a gift! It leads to true freedom.

2. *Develop Holy Desires and Renew Your Mind*

-Desires (good or evil) are powerful. **Ps. 119:36; Phil. 1:20**; To Please the Lord;

-The beautiful Christian life of Colossians 3.

-Renew the mind-**Rom. 12:2**. The way that we think affects how we live.

3. Consider the consequences of sin

-**Prov. 21:12**-Consider the end of the wicked. **Prov. 11:3,5,6; 13:6**

-Fear/Anxiety=lack of trust in God; lack of joy and peace. Choking of my spiritual fruitfulness to God's glory.

-Life of Samson=a strong man who did great things, but could have done more.

His persistence in sin led to a dulled spiritual discernment and losing strength.

-This is to be remembered when sinful desire is so blinding and strong.

-This is going to hinder my communion with God, which is the greatest prize of all.

-This is going to hinder my family in Christ.

4. *The Power of Gratitude-Col. 3:15.*

-The logic of sinful desire is to look at what I don't have and seek it. It ignores the many blessings I receive. Being filled with thanksgiving makes it is harder to sin.

-Instead of whining over the things you don't have or wish were better, consciously think of all the blessings of God in your life.

-Instead of nursing bitterness towards you parents, consciously think of all the reasons you can be thankful for them.

## SELF-DISCIPLINE: A TOOL FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

(MUCH OF THE MATERIAL RECORDED HERE IS FROM A SERMON PREACHED AT COLLIERVILLE PRIMITIVE BAPTIST CHURCH, COLLIERVILLE, TENNESSEE, FEBRUARY 21, 2010.)

It is safe to say that self-discipline does not come easily to most of us. I admit to a bit of an inward groan sometimes when I hear or read the phrase. It sounds restrictive, demanding, and maybe even a little painful. However, it is a command of God, and in reality, a great blessing from Him when we exercise it. Rather than being something that holds God's child back, it is actually something that will spring us forward to deeper communion with Jesus Christ, increased fruitfulness in His service, and a powerful weapon against sin. As with many things in Christian service, the lie of the enemy often creeps into our minds telling us that God's commands rob us of something. In reality, His commands, such as self-discipline, lovingly and graciously free us in our Christian race.

Self-discipline is thoroughly Biblical and thoroughly Christian. When we think of the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5, it is probably more common to initially think of love, joy, or faith, and understandably so. However, the very last of the fruit mentioned there is temperance. Temperance simply means self-control. Just as Christian faith and love are evidences of saving grace, so is self-control as well. Therefore, we should desire and labor that this fruit be abundantly present in our lives. Furthermore, self-control is one of the basics of what defines being a follower of Jesus. Jesus plainly stated in Luke 9:23: "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me." If I claim to be a follower of Jesus, then it must be a given that I daily am responsible to be engaged in self-discipline.

Is there really a need for such a thing as self-discipline? We know the obvious answer. The need starts at our fallen nature. Naturally, we are self-centered. Naturally, we are concerned with our own comforts, desires, and inclinations. We have to be taught out of selfishness. Add to our fallen nature that we as Americans have lived in a self-centered, and in many ways, a spoiled culture. We all have undoubtedly been affected by the "fast food" mentality: "I want what I want and I want it NOW!" While I do not pray for our prosperity to turn to poverty, yet it is an obvious fact that prosperity can easily enhance our self-centered ways. So, it is crystal clear that we have need of self-discipline.

### Discipline With a Purpose

In his book, *Spiritual Disciplines For The Christian Life*, Donald Whitney gives this powerful statement, "Discipline without direction is drudgery."<sup>1</sup> He then tells a fictional story of a young boy who is compelled by his parents to start guitar lessons. After school every day instead of playing baseball with his friends, the poor fellow has to spend his time at guitar lessons. All he sees is the baseball he is missing out on. This is drudgery. However, his perspective changes when an angel takes him transported in a vision to Carnegie Hall where a virtuoso guitarist is working his wonders on the strings. The

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<sup>1</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines For The Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress Publishing Group, 1991), p. 15.

young boy is blown away by this sight. The angel then informs the boy that the expert guitarist is *him* in a few years. The only thing is, he has to practice!

Though it is a far-fetched story, the point is clearly illustrated. Discipline without a purpose *is* drudgery. Take the athlete for example. For the college football player, probably the most attractive thought of the sport is the fall Saturday afternoons with packed stadiums, marching bands playing their tunes and the prospect of winning championships. But that is not all there is to being a college football player. There are the hot days of August when painful drills and exercises must be performed. There is the detailed, pain-staking preparation for game day that takes place in quiet rooms far-removed from the excitement of a full stadium. There is waking up early for practice and even regulating diet in some cases. Many of the things required of them are arduous. But why does the athlete put himself through this rigorous routine? Because he sees the goal of it all! He is not doing the drills just to do drills. He is doing drills with that game-saving play on a Saturday in November in mind. **There is a purpose** to his discipline.

And so it should be in spiritual exercises. You may find it difficult sometimes to read the Bible. It may seem that you understand and process little of what you are reading. The discipline of making yourself form a habit of daily reading and study feels sometimes like just that...discipline. If you do not have a purpose in mind of *why* you're doing this, it will be just drudgery. But you do have a purpose in such an exercise. You want to know more about God! You desire to have a deeper walk with Jesus Christ. You want to know better how to worship Him and live for Him. You want to keep your heart from getting cold and from falling into sin. You want your spirit to be strengthened. Ultimately, you want to glorify God. Therefore, you have a great purpose (the greatest of purposes) in the discipline of faithfully reading, studying, meditating, and even memorizing Scripture. The same could be said with developing your prayer life. Prayer is sometimes very hard work. Our cold hearts at times do not feel much like praying. However, you know that if you want to develop a closeness with God, you must pray. You remember the Scriptural statement: "you have not because you ask not" (Jas. 4:2), and you recognize the great need to pray. Perhaps, the need for self-discipline is in your marriage. You want to have a close relationship with your spouse. In order for that to happen, you may have to discipline yourself to communicate with your spouse when you do not feel like it.

One of our problems is that we want the *benefits* of something without putting forth the necessary *effort*. Who would not want a paycheck at the end of each month? But, is everyone willing to put in the effort required to earn that check? Proverbs 13:4 states it poignantly: "The soul of the sluggard desireth, and hath nothing: but the soul of the diligent shall be made fat." The sluggard, or lazy person, desires but has nothing to show for it. There are probably many people who would desire to own and operate their own successful businesses. But, all those who have that desire would not be disciplined enough to make it happen on a day-to-day basis. It is not always our desire that is the problem in our Christian walk. Many want to be close to God, to know the Scriptures well, to have a fervent prayer life, have a good marriage, be faithful church members, serve others, and so forth. But not all are diligent in carrying out that desire. It is the diligent that shall be made fat, or prosperous, according to the proverb. It is true in the

natural and spiritual realm that often *the most precious things we possess are those for which we have worked the hardest.*

Much of the time discipline means sacrifice. For instance, one who has been motivated to spend consistent time in God's word may have to give up time from another area. You may have to sacrifice time from a hobby in order to spend time in God's Word. There are numerous occasions where we must sacrifice to give of our time and effort to serve in various functions surrounding the church or the family. But, sacrifice is not a bad thing! Hard sometimes, but not bad. In fact, sacrifice lies at the very core of what it means to be a Christian. As Christians we claim to be followers of One who was sacrificed for us. He has told us to take up our cross (a symbol of sacrifice) and follow Him. Furthermore, the treasure and benefits of discipline or sacrifice far outweigh the discomfort. Just ask the man who has spent many hours memorizing God's Word. He is ever-thankful for his hours of hard work when those very passages pop up in his mind at just the hour he greatly needs them. The married couple who has disciplined themselves in making time for each other sees the effort as more than worth it when they enjoy the benefits of a closer companionship. Friends, unless we believe that the pain of the discipline pales in comparison to the benefit of it, we likely will not put forth sustained effort in self-discipline in the service of God. Do you believe God's Word? Do you believe it is worth it?

#### Profitable Unto All Things

Paul instructed Timothy: "But refuse profane and old wives' fables, and exercise thyself rather unto godliness. For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come" (I Tim. 4:7,8). Paul told Timothy here to exercise himself unto (for the purpose of) godliness. Exercise is translated from the Greek word *gymnasia*. It leads us to our English word *gymnasium*. A *gymnasium* is a place for training, exercise. Look at it this way—when you discipline yourself to spend time in prayer on a given morning or evening, look at it like you have run a sprint for the good of your soul! When you make yourself attend the worship service of your church on a day when you do not feel like it, it is like you are spiritually doing sit-ups. When you restrain yourself from giving in to a certain temptation, you can think of it like you are abstaining from some junk food that will hinder your spiritual health.

For further motivation, Paul tells Timothy of the great benefit of godliness, the result of spiritual self-discipline. It "is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come." When Paul says it is profitable, he is not saying that it will necessarily be profitable to your bank account. Rather the idea is that it will greatly benefit your soul! Godliness *is* profitable. It is profitable for every season of life--youth, middle and old age. How many people because of their sinful folly of youth have brought great pain and regret that plagues them even to middle and elderly years? Godliness benefits the young person by teaching him true wisdom. The young person who disciplines himself to godliness avoids the many traps and pitfalls that will bring many of his peers down. Godliness profits those in old age. They have, for instance, disciplined themselves to trust in God. Therefore, when they face loneliness, physical

pain, and financial concern, they have already established a loving confidence in their Heavenly Father.

Godliness is profitable in every circumstance. In prosperous and peaceful seasons, the godly person seeks to keep himself from getting spiritually complacent while he also is mindful to praise and thank God for his present blessings. Godliness aids the one who is enduring crisis, grief, and disappointment. Godliness is profitable in marriage, in the family, in work, in the church and in various other relationships. Godliness is profitable! Therefore, I must daily discipline myself to grow in it more and more.

Additionally, Paul reminds Timothy that godliness is not some temporary venture. He says, “For bodily exercise profiteth little...” meaning for a little season, a temporary time. This is not an indictment against physical exercise, indeed we ought to be mindful to be good caretakers of our physical bodies, which are the temples of the Holy Ghost. However, physical exercise understandably has a limited view. It is exercising a mortal body that will certainly face corruption. No matter how much physical exercise a person may engage in, they cannot escape the fact that they are working out a body that will have an end. However, when we engage in serving the Lord, in drawing closer to Jesus Christ and fighting sin, we are doing it with a view to eternity! How often are we reminded in Scripture that we are to live our lives with an eternal perspective (see Matt. 6:19-21; II Cor. 4:17,18; Col. 3:1-5). We are running in a race with a finish line, eternal glory, in mind. We recognize that our legal standing is already in heaven with Christ, therefore, we are to live in accordance with our position. We are trying to discipline ourselves to worship God now, with lip and life, which we will be doing for all eternity. We are seeking to know Christ deeper every day here, which is simply a foretaste of our activity in glory itself. Physical exercise carries temporary promise. You will feel better. You will have less risk of heart disease. These things are true, but it is only temporary. When we are serving God, we are serving an *eternal* God! His kingdom spans over the timeliness of this world. So, ponder the greatness of your endeavor. Exercising yourself for godliness carries a far greater and glorious weight than we can fully fathom. When you discipline yourself in fighting sin, reading the Bible, holding back your tongue, and so forth, it is a glorious exercise indeed!

#### Lack of Discipline = Danger

In Bible days, cities commonly had walls that surrounded them for protection. If you were moving from one part of Israel to another, for example, you would want to settle in a city with solid, stable walls. Can you imagine living in a city that had huge gaps of the wall that were broken or decayed? What about living in a city with no walls at all? Not a peaceful thought. In view of this, consider Proverbs 25:28: “He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls.”

There is a dangerous vulnerability we place ourselves under when we do not exercise self-discipline. Take the tongue, for example. The children’s rhyme, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me,” is pitifully untrue. James says, “And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity; so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature: and it is set on fire of

hell” (Jas. 3:6). Verse 8 of the same chapter says of the tongue: “...It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.” Wow! Fire, poison, a world of iniquity, set on fire of hell! How much hellish fire and poisonous iniquity have flowed freely from tongues, sadly even from Christian tongues. Cutting words spoken in anger to a spouse, a co-worker, a brother or sister in Christ, or even to a stranger. We all have probably given and received some of the ugliness of words unchecked and uncontrolled.

Think of the damage of unchecked anger. We hear of murders that take place all the time because a domestic argument got hotter and hotter until someone acted in an uncontrolled way. Violence has been done that stemmed from arguments over extremely foolish and petty things.

Consider the case of King Saul. You may not see yourself as one who struggles with murder, but do you struggle with envy or pride? That’s where Saul’s murderous, crazed actions started. After David defeated Goliath, the women sang jubilantly in the streets about how Saul had slain his thousands and David had slain ten thousands. I Samuel 18:8,9 records Saul’s reaction: “And Saul was very wroth, and the saying displeased him; and he said, ‘They have ascribed unto David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed but thousands: and what can he have more but the kingdom?’ And Saul eyed David from that day forward.” The following chapters of I Samuel record how that Saul’s envy and venom against David brewed abundantly in his heart. It led Saul to order the murder of eighty-five priests of God, including their wives and children. It led him to spend hours and hours leading an army around Israel pursuing David, who was no real danger to him. He concocted schemes and made plans to get David. Even after David had multiple opportunities to kill Saul, and did not, Saul still continued on in this frame. Where did all of this vile, irrational behavior originate? Pride and envy unchecked, unguarded, uncontrolled.

Consider David later on in his life. He sees the beautiful Bathsheba. This was not necessarily David’s fault. It was not sin that he found Bathsheba attractive. However, he did not control his lustful thoughts. He acted in impulse, unchecked, unguarded. The result? A heinous sin that dishonored God, the tearing apart of his own family, and a revolt that greatly affected all of Israel. We could give many more examples, both from the Scriptures and our own experiences that highlight the necessity of self-discipline in our fight against sin.

I once heard wise Elder Bobby Poe preach a sermon about cutting off sin at the root. The idea is, if you have a temptation, cut the process off there. If you have already given in to the temptation, cut it off there. Do not allow sin, whether in thought or action, continue to grow. Perhaps you have an evil thought towards another person. Confess and forsake it immediately, not allowing it grow in your mind. We sing the hymn “Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross” and rightfully so, because we have to constantly run to the Cross for forgiveness, cleansing, and grace to fight the roaring of our sinful nature. We know we will not be free from sinful inclinations and desires until our deliverance from this world, but we must recognize our great resources in Christ to control ourselves.

Self-discipline necessarily involves training or practice. Perhaps someone has the tendency to always have the “last word” in a discussion or argument. Obviously, this is a manifestation of pride and the opposite of a peacemaking spirit. This person should practice not having the last word. Just start doing that; try it one time. When the urge arises to finish off the discussion with a bang, bite the tongue, hold off.

Self-discipline also can involve forming habits. Consider this hypothetical scenario: “I’m a time waster. It’s not necessarily bad stuff I’m doing, it’s just that I don’t control it. When I get on the computer I always go to Facebook. I start looking at all my friends’ pages, the comments, and everything else. Before I know it, I’ve just blown an hour doing that! I’m supposed to spend part of that hour writing notes to the elderly in my church.” Many of us can identify with such a thing. Can the habit be broken? Of course. Time yourself, giving a certain amount of time to the computer, then get off! After doing this enough times, perhaps you will have trained yourself out of that bad habit. Whatever method is used, we can overcome such things by the grace of God. A friend of mine struggled with a spirit of complaining on many mornings as he would drive to work in an old clunker of a car. The radio did not work, the heat and air did not work. It soured his mood. Being convicted of this, he knew he needed to change. He knew that God called him to thanksgiving at all times. He began to use these mornings to think of the things he could give thanks to God about and soon his morning commutes to work were joy-filled occasions. We often believe the lie that says, “I can’t really change, this is just the way that I am.” Is that true of one who has the sovereign and all-powerful Holy Spirit residing within? Sure, some things may be fought and struggled against for a lifetime, but progress can be made through the power of Christ.

For Christian men, living in this age of incredible immorality marked by suggestive dress of many women, billboards, advertisements and so forth, it can be a great challenge to fight the lustful look. I once read a book where a man suggested training yourself to “bounce” your eyes when such a temptation came along. We often cannot help seeing such a sight, but we can train ourselves to bounce our eyes off of it to something else. Maybe you think these types of suggestions are a little ridiculous. Thanking God in your clunker car, bouncing your eyes, training yourself to not to spend an inordinate amount of time on the computer. But, friends, these are the places in our daily lives where **battles are won and lost!** Some of these things may seem like small battles. But many small battles lost have a devastating effect. Many small battles won makes for a victorious campaign!

#### Owned by Christ

We must recognize that it is not only overtly sinful things that must be dealt with in self-discipline. No, the battle goes beyond complaining, immorality, and evil speech. We also have to exercise self-discipline in permissible things. Paul said it well in I Corinthians 6:12: “All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.” I talked with a Christian woman recently who has overcome being “brought under the power” of shopping. Shopping! That is not a sin, is it? Of course not, it is a necessary and perfectly permissible activity. It is not wrong even to enjoy shopping. Some people greatly enjoy

looking for sales and bargains. However, this permissible thing, along with any others, can be taken to inordinate measures. That is where it becomes sinful. This lady began shopping on a cable shopping network. She started spending so much, that she was spending money she really did not have. She got new credit cards just to transfer the debts of another card. She would buy three pairs of things when only one was needed. She was not even just buying for herself, she was buying for others as well. Through covetousness, a permissible thing had obviously become impermissible. Thankfully, the story ends well. She took drastic measures, cut up her credit cards, cut off her cable to prevent her from seeing the shopping network, and now only pays for things with cash. She told me with a joyful expression, "I've been free for 14 months!"

It is not only shopping. It can be a hobby, sports, entertainment, or even food. Food is good. We have to eat to survive. Furthermore, God has graciously made food and our taste buds to where eating can be a great experience! I love good food! However, when I eat immoderately, I have become a glutton and that is sin. Some people start eating food to cure depression. This is where food, a permissible thing, has gotten out of control. I enjoy following sports as well. This is not an inherently sinful activity. But, if it begins to take too much control of my time, thoughts, or even money, I have overstepped my bounds. Entertainment is another area. While there is much evil entertainment in our society, there is wholesome as well. But, it is easy to become addicted to entertainment. I feel like I *must* play this video game, watch this movie, or buy this new music CD. Many more areas could be explored.

What to do with all of this? Quit eating? Quit shopping? What we must seek is what Paul said: "I will not be brought under the power of any." That is, I do not want to be controlled or "owned" by anything other than Christ. If I am addicted to entertainment, I must wean myself from it to the degree that I can take it or leave it. I can enjoy it from time to time, but I am not to be bound by it. I must seek to control my appetite to the degree that I can enjoy good food but not be owned by it.

Here are a few practical suggestions. Periodically, just say "no" to yourself on something perfectly legitimate. I learned a valuable lesson from Elder Herb Hatfield in something he practiced when he was a truck driver. From time to time on his drives, he would buy a candy bar that had two pieces in the package. One of the pieces he would eat, the other he would set aside and not allow himself to touch it the rest of the trip. When he arrived home, he would present it as a gift to his wife. Now that's self-discipline! It was not sinful for him to eat the other half, but he was *training himself* in self-discipline. The point is to be able to say with authority, "Stomach, you don't own me." Perhaps the sports enthusiast may have the opportunity to watch a ball game one night. It would not be a bad idea to occasionally say, "No, I don't have to do that tonight." Again, I want to have the attitude that I can take my hobby and enjoy it, or I can leave it. Fasting and prayer is another great exercise to develop self-discipline. It is something our Savior Himself did as God-man while on this earth. Only when you have actually done this can you understand how it can wean us away from ourselves and develop a close communion with God.



For clarification, let me say that the point of the above suggestions is not to infuse unnecessary guilt. You do not have to feel bad if you liked the food you ate last night and even liked it a lot! We can enjoy the things God has given “richly to enjoy” (I Tim. 6:17) to His glory and honor. The aim is control, moderation. My personal suggestions are not law. You may be able to use different methods to develop self-discipline. I do firmly believe that a self-disciplined follower of Christ can have greater enjoyment in the good things of this life better than one who is bound by them. The believer can feast on a good meal and enjoy it to the fullest, but be free from overindulging. The person who enjoys shopping can do it and enjoy it with moderation, while not being a slave to it. The fellow whose favorite hobby is fishing or horseback riding can partake of those things and have a blast at it, while not allowing it to take a greater place and priority than it should. Enjoy the good, natural blessings of this life while not being owned by them!

### Closing

The Apostle Paul was very serious about his efforts to control himself against sin. Consider his words in I Corinthians 9:24-27:

*“Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.”*

Paul was drawing from athletic imagery in this passage. Running the race, striving for the mastery (competing in the games), beating the air (boxing) were his analogies. He ran the race like he wanted to win. That is, he gave tremendous effort and zeal to following Christ. He was not just shadow-boxing, or beating the air as he put it. He was in a real fight on a daily basis and was fighting to win. Finally, he proclaimed that he kept his body in subjection. That is, he ruled over his passions, his desires, his sinful nature. He did not want those things to rule him. His fear was that after he had so boldly proclaimed the gospel to many others that he himself would bring shame on the cause by falling into grievous sin. Are you like Paul in this sense? Is it important to you to fight against sin, to develop self-control, so that you may be more fruitful to the glory of Christ? May we be inspired to follow this example.

In closing, let me say that the ceiling of perfection in this or any other area will not be reached this side of glory. Some very conscientious saint may rob themselves of much joy and peace in Christ because they are not perfect in this area of self-control. Self-control is not what will save you. Only the righteousness of Jesus Christ makes you acceptable in the sight of God. Your justification knows no degrees, even though your sanctification (including self-discipline) does. Self-discipline is a daily discipline, a daily effort. There will likely be gains and be losses. You may fall again into wasting time, eating too much, or having the last word in the discussion. But, recognize that God is the God of hope. Even if you fall, you can rise again by His grace, and continue the effort

with great success. You can grow in self-discipline. You do not have to be bound and hindered to such a degree as you may be now. Look ahead, move forward in this worthy effort in the name, in the assistance of, and for the glory of Jesus Christ!