

Bible Study for January 9th and 11th

As troubling as statistics are regarding the physical health of our nation, there is a far more troubling problem with professing Christians. It is the neglect of spiritual exercise resulting in the spiritual obesity of most Christians. 1 Timothy 4:8 contrasts the benefits of physical exercise with the benefits of spiritual exercise. Paul's conclusion is that spiritual exercise is much more profitable than bodily exercise. Bodily exercise "profiteth little," it has temporary benefits. But spiritual exercise "is profitable unto all things," it has eternal benefits.

What is the Purpose of Spiritual Disciplines?

There is one thing that keeps these spiritual exercises, that we'll be calling disciplines, from being legalistic and that is their goal. 1 Tim. 4:7 says, "exercise thyself . . . unto godliness." This is the goal that God has for each of us and therefore is the goal that we should have for ourselves.

God Commands Us to Be Holy

The spiritual exercises that we'll be talking about for the next several weeks are the means that God has graciously given to us for our growth in godliness. That is why this is such an important topic—God commands us to be holy.

There are three ideas in the Scripture that are used interchangeably for the ultimate purpose of the Christian: Holiness, Christlikeness and Godliness. The only road to Christian maturity and Godliness passes through the practice of the Spiritual Disciplines.

Many Christians feel that disciplines = drudgery or boredom. There is a real danger of the disciplines become drudgery if there is no direction or purpose. If we're only studying the Scripture to check off a spiritual checklist, if we're only witnessing so that we can say we've had a contact in Sunday School, if we're only praying to ease our conscience, we're in danger of allowing the disciplines to become a legalistic, boring drudgery.

However, it doesn't have to be this way. In his book *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, Don Whitney gives a great illustration of how to escape the discipline's potential drudgery. He wrote of Kevin, a six-year-old boy, whose parents have enrolled him in music lessons. After school each day, he sits in the living room practicing while watching through the window his buddies play baseball across the street. That's discipline without direction. It's drudgery. But Kevin is visited by an angel one afternoon during his practice and transported to Carnegie Hall where a musician plays the guitar expertly. Kevin is amazed. Then the angel says to him that what he has seen is himself in the future, but he must practice to get there. Do you think his attitude toward practice will be different now? As long as he remembers what he's going to become, Kevin's discipline will have a direction. Yes, effort will be involved, but you could hardly call it drudgery.

When it comes to discipline in the Christian life, many believers feel as Kevin did toward guitar practice – it's discipline without direction. But when we begin to understand what we shall become discipline can be transformed to delight! It is said of God's elect in Romans 8:29, "For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren."

1 John 3:2 states, "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is."

This no mere vision; this is you, child of God, in a few years. So why all the talk about discipline? If God has predestined our conformity to Christlikeness, where does discipline fit in?

Although God will grant Christlikeness to us when Jesus returns, until then He intends for us to grow toward that Christlikeness. We aren't merely to wait for holiness, we are to pursue it.

Legislators' Weekly Bible study meets each Tuesday (except following a Monday holiday) and Thursday in Capitol Annex Room 436 from 12:00-12:30 pm. It is the same study both days to allow flexibility for everyone's committee schedules.

In 1 Peter 1:14-16, believers are told to be “As obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance: But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy.”

And in Hebrews 12:14 Christians are commanded to “Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.” These commands lead us to ask, “How shall we pursue holiness? How can we be Christlike? How can we be Godly?”

For the answer we look again at 1 Timothy 4:7: “exercise thyself rather unto godliness.” This verse will be the theme for the next several weeks as we look at different spiritual exercises used by Christians to produce Godliness. When we remember Godliness is the goal of the disciplines, the Spiritual Disciplines become a delight instead of a drudgery.

What Are the Spiritual Disciplines?

Beginning today we’ll be examining the Spiritual Disciplines of Bible intake, prayer, worship, evangelism, service, stewardship, fasting, silence and solitude, journaling and learning. These are the God-given means we are to use in the Spirit-filled pursuit of Godliness.

Just as there is little value in practicing the scales on a guitar and a piano apart from the purpose of playing music, there is little value in practicing the Spiritual Disciplines apart from the single purpose that unites them.

Throughout the history of the church, Godly people have always been disciplined people. In your own experience, have you ever known someone who was Godly who wasn’t disciplined in most of these areas.

God uses three primary catalysts to conform us to the image of Christ: people (positive and negative), circumstances (good and bad) and the Spiritual Disciplines. We have little choice about the people and circumstances that God surrounds us with, but we choose daily whether we will “exercise unto godliness.”

Therefore, we should think of the Spiritual Disciplines as exercises. Just as you would go for a walk or go to a gym for physical strength, we should practice the Spiritual Disciplines for the purpose of Godliness.

In Luke 18 and 19 we are told the stories of two individuals: a blind beggar named Bartimaeus and a wee little man named Zacchaeus. Both of these men heard Jesus was coming and placed themselves in His path to ensure they would be in His presence when He passed by. Think of the Spiritual Disciplines as the way we put ourselves in the path of God’s grace to grow spiritually.

The Spiritual Disciplines are like channels of God’s transforming grace. As we place ourselves in them to seek communion with Christ, His grace flows to us and we are changed. That’s why the Disciplines must become priority for us if we will be Godly.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon said it this way, “I must take care above all that I cultivate communion with Christ, for though that can never be the basis of my peace – mark that – yet it will be the channel of it.” The channels of peace and all that Christ gives that lead us to holiness are the Spiritual Disciplines.

Tom Landry, coach of the Dallas Cowboys for most of their first thirty years in existence, said, “The job of a football coach is to make men do what they don’t want to do in order to achieve what they’ve always wanted to be.” In the same way Christians are called to make themselves do what they would never do in order to become what they want to be - like Christ.

The Fruit of Spiritual Disciplines: FREEDOM

Have you ever seen an athlete play so well that you’ve said, “He makes it look easy.” Have you ever seen a musician so talented that they looked as if they were born with their instrument attached to them. From where does this freedom come? Many years of disciplined practice.

I’m not free to play basketball like LeBron James because I haven’t disciplined myself to play at that level. The freedom of Godliness comes only to those who are disciplined in the Spiritual exercises we will study together the next several weeks. It is, however, a lifelong pursuit.

So, may I issue a challenge to you today. Not to physical fitness, but to a much higher calling to spiritual fitness by exercising yourself unto Godliness. How can I start? You can start by committing to discipline yourself to be here for the next several weeks to learn about some of the disciplines that God has used to transform the lives of Christians throughout the centuries.

This study adapted from chapter one of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* by Donald S. Whitney.