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NAU Campus Crusade

The Discipline That Matters 1 Timothy 4:6-10

As I watched the 10K runners in the recent Olympics, I sat on my couch thinking, "It sure would be fun to run like those guys do!" And then, to my surprise, an ad came on where the announcer asked, "Would you like to run like these athletes do? This miraculous, proven new pill will enable you to run like a champion! Just take one pill daily and within 30 days, you will run the 10 K in under 30 minutes. Only \$50 for 30 pills!"

If I were dumb enough to fall for such an ad, I would deserve to lose my \$50! We all know that there is no effortless, easy way to becoming a champion runner. To make the Olympics, those runners have spent countless hours disciplining themselves for the goal of winning the gold. Any promise of some miraculous way to do what they do apart from years of training and hard work would clearly be bogus.

Yet as Christians we fall prey to hucksters who pitch their spiritual snake-oil, guaranteed to solve all our problems: "Attend this conference and your life will be forever changed." We attend and come away on a spiritual high that lasts for a while, but the glow wears off. "Have this spiritual experience and you will live on a new spiritual high." We try it for a while, but then disillusionment sets in. Read this book, or try this method, and you will never struggle again. But none of these panaceas deliver what they claim.

What's our problem? We're looking for an easy, quick way to get where we can only go by disciplining ourselves for the purpose of godliness. We're shopping for an effortless way to get what the Bible clearly states comes only through hard work and struggle. There is no way to godliness except through discipline. In my 24 years of pastoral experience, I have found that, more than any other quality, self-discipline will have the greatest influence on whether you do well spiritually or not. Invariably, defeated Christians are undisciplined Christians.

I know, you didn't want to hear that! We live in a society that offers a quick fix to every problem. Whether it's "a miraculous new program to lose weight," or "a proven, effortless way to learn a foreign language," we're suckers. We'll pay hard-earned cash for the promise of easy answers to tough problems. But mark it well: You will not make it spiritually if you do not become disciplined. That's the message Paul is giving to his younger co-worker, Timothy, in 1 Timothy 4:6-10.

Maybe you're thinking, "I'd like to be disciplined, but I try for a while and then fall back to my old ways. What's the key to becoming disciplined?" The key to discipline is *motivation*. Why do those Olympic athletes drive themselves relentlessly for years? They're motivated to win a gold medal. The late Dallas Cowboys coach, Tom Landry, put it, "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" (cited by Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* [NavPress], p. 18). The key to being a disciplined Christian is to be a motivated Christian.

What is it that should motivate us to discipline ourselves for godliness? It's that eternal issues are at stake.

Because eternal issues are at stake, we must discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness.

1. Eternal issues are at stake.

Souls live forever. Eternity is the issue. Nothing could be more important! Paul mentions three eternal issues that will motivate us to discipline ourselves for godliness:

- A. The fact of eternity itself should motivate us to discipline ourselves for godliness (4:8).

Paul is not despising bodily exercise. Rather, he is making a comparison between bodily exercise and spiritual exercise. It's fine to discipline your physical body; it will help you for a few years. But it's far better to discipline yourself spiritually, because it will put you in good stead not only in this life, but also in the life to come. This means that we ought to work much harder at godliness than we do at our games! Do you?

The great evangelist, George Whitefield, once told of seeing some criminals riding in a cart on their way to the gallows. They were arguing like a bunch of kids going on a trip about who should sit on the right hand of the cart. Here were men condemned to die in a few hours, but their focus was on who got the best seat on the way to the execution!

But isn't that exactly like everyone who is living for this life rather than for eternity? You see people in our beauty-obsessed culture who are health nuts. They eat all the proper foods. They take vitamins and minerals. They work out to keep in shape. But the fact is, they're going to die. All their efforts may extend their lives a few years, if they don't get cancer or die in a car crash or some other way. But they're foolish because they're living as if this life is all there is and as if they can extend their lives indefinitely.

One of the reasons we're so spiritually flabby is that we're caught up with the temporal. We tend to think that we and others will live forever. But we won't. The Puritan preacher, Richard Baxter, used to say, "I preach as though I might never preach again, and as a dying man to dying men." The Bible is clear that as members of the fallen human race, we're all in that cart, on the way to the gallows. We'd better be preparing for what lies beyond. Because eternity is a fact, we should discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness.

B. The fact of the living God should motivate us to discipline ourselves for godliness (4:10).

"We have fixed our hope on the living God." That is, God is real. He is the God who is there, to use Francis Schaeffer's term. He is not the projection of our minds. He created the universe and all that is in it. Because He is the living God, we can live each day in communion with Him.

If that's not true, we're wasting our time. If there is no eternity with the living God, then eat, drink, and be merry, because tomorrow you die (1 Cor. 15:32). But if it's true that God is living, and we have fixed our hope on Him, then it should motivate us to discipline ourselves for godliness.

C. The fact of salvation should motivate us to discipline ourselves for godliness (4:10).

“God is the Savior of all men, especially of believers.” What does Paul mean? He does *not* mean that all people will be saved. If that were so, then why did Paul pour out his life for the gospel? Paul clearly taught that Christ is returning to take His people to be with Him, but also to mete out judgment to those who have not obeyed the gospel (2 Thess. 1:8-9). Not all will be saved.

There are two main interpretations. Some say that Paul is using the word “Savior” in a general sense with regard to the world, in that God gives protection and provision even to the wicked. But in a special sense He is the Savior of believers, since He not only gives them temporal blessings, but eternal deliverance from His judgment. The problem with this view is that it forces on the word Savior an unusual meaning that does not fit the context.

A better view is that Paul is countering the false teachers, who said that salvation is an exclusive thing for those in the inner circle who had secret “knowledge.” Paul is saying, “No, God wants to save all types of people in every place, from every walk of life. He has made salvation available for all, but it is only applied to those who believe in Christ.” The point is, apart from Christ people are alienated from God, on their way to eternal judgment. But God will save all who will believe. Since we’re called to proclaim that good news, the fact of God’s salvation should motivate us to discipline ourselves for godliness.

So these eternal issues—the fact of eternity itself; the fact of the living God; and, the fact of salvation—should motivate us for the hardship of discipline unto godliness. Then comes the work:

2. We must discipline ourselves for godliness.

What is discipline? First I’ll sketch what it is. Then I’ll show how to implement it.

A. What discipline is:

1) Discipline is an ongoing process, not a quick fix.

The present imperative verb points to a process. This means that you can never say, “I’ve arrived!” It’s like staying in shape physically: You can do it for 25 years, but the day you quit you start getting flabby. You’ve got to keep at it. So, no matter where you’re at spiritually, verse 7 applies to you. It’s a lifetime process.

2) Discipline involves hard work.

“We labor and strive.” Strive is a word used of wrestlers in an athletic contest, giving every ounce of strength to defeat their opponent. This means that discipline doesn’t come naturally! It’s not a spiritual gift.

By definition, discipline means acting against your feelings because you have a higher goal. We’re being encouraged in our day to live by our feelings. If we violate our feelings, we might do some sort of psychological damage! But if you’re disciplined, even though you feel like that piece of chocolate cake, since your goal is to lose weight, you deny your feelings. Or, you feel like sacking in; but your goal is to be godly, so you roll out of bed, grab your Bible, and spend time with the Lord. It’s not easy and it doesn’t always feel good at the moment!

Discipline is something in which both God and you must be involved. “Self-control” is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23). That is, when the Spirit of God controls you, He gives you the ability to control yourself. Thus God does it, and yet Paul can tell Timothy, “Discipline yourself.” You have responsibility in the process. The bottom line is, “Are you willing to pay the price?” If athletes put themselves through years of hard work and training to get a silly gold medal, shouldn’t we be willing to pay the price to be godly?

3) Discipline means discarding hindrances.

Paul tells Timothy to “have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women” (4:7). Some translate it “old wives’ tales.” It refers to the stories an old woman might pass on to her grandchildren. Paul was ridiculing the “endless myths and genealogies” of the false teachers (1:4). These things may have been interesting, but they did not contribute toward godliness.

The Greek word for “discipline” is *gymnazo*, from which we get “gymnasium.” It came from a word meaning “naked,” because the Greek athletes would strip off their clothing so as not to be hindered from their purpose of winning their event. The point is, if we’re going to train ourselves for godliness, there are hindrances we have to strip off. We have to say no to things that hinder us from our purpose. Of course that includes all sin; but also it includes things that may be all right in and of themselves, but they

don't help you grow toward godliness. It certainly means controlling the TV set and the amount of time you play computer games!

4) Discipline means keeping your eyes on the goal.

The goal is fairly clear: "godliness" (in the Greek) has the nuance of "reverence for God." It points to a person who is growing in conformity to God in his character and daily life because he has fixed his hope on God (4:10). He takes God seriously and recognizes the practical implications in terms of developing a godly thought life, godly speech, and godly actions. The way we move toward that goal is to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus (Heb. 12:2) so that we become more and more like Him, especially as we endure the trials that God uses to make us more like Him.

5) Discipline means managing your time in line with your goals.

This point is not directly in the text, but it's a logical necessity. An athlete works his schedule around his goal. He says no to many good activities so that he can say yes to his daily workout. Annie Dillard has said the obvious, "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives" (*Reader's Digest*, [7/92], p. 137). And how we spend our minutes and hours is how we spend our days. The goal of godliness demands that you spend time each day alone with God in His Word and prayer.

It's not a question of having a schedule. You have one! We all have the same number of hours in our day. We all make time to do what we want to do. The question is, Is your schedule in line with your goal of becoming a godly person?

6) Discipline is not opposed to the grace of God.

Many people resist discipline by saying, "That's legalistic!" It can become legalistic if your motive is wrong. But if your motive is to love and please the God who gave His Son for you, it's not legalistic. Grace doesn't mean sloppy living (1 Cor. 15:10).

Although discipline sounds restrictive, it is the only way to true freedom. Someone who has disciplined himself to play the piano or to speak a foreign language is free to do things that I am restricted from doing. In the verses just prior to this, Paul talks about enjoying God and then moves on to talk about discipline.

They go hand in hand. The disciplined Christian enjoys God in ways the undisciplined person cannot.

7) Discipline is not driving yourself relentlessly.

Some people get obsessed with discipline to the point that they can't relax or enjoy time off. We need the balance of Scripture, which teaches that God rested after His labor, and so should we. He made our bodies to require sleep. We're not good stewards if we drive ourselves until we burn out, either physically or emotionally.

Often our problem is that we mess around when we're supposed to be working, so we feel guilty when we try to relax. A disciplined Christian will work hard when he works and thankfully take time for rest and recreation when it's needed. As far as the Lord's work goes, it helps me to remember that God is the Savior of the world; I'm not. By His grace, I can labor and strive for His purpose, but I can also relax and not worry that somehow His purpose will flounder without me.

8) Discipline is not being so rigid that you are insensitive to what God is doing.

This point also comes from the balance of Scripture, not directly from our text. It's good to be disciplined for the purpose of godliness, but you can abuse that good goal by becoming so rigid that you miss what God is doing. For example, if you're having your quiet time and an unsaved friend knocks on your door and wants to talk about spiritual things, you would be too rigid to send him away so that you can finish your quiet time. Jesus always did the Father's will, but He always had time for people who interrupted Him (Mark 5:21-43).

B. How we implement discipline:

1) By being constantly nourished in the truths of the faith (4:6).

The present tense verb means that we must continually feed on God's Word, or "sound doctrine." Spiritual warfare involves your mind, and your mind affects your morals. So it's crucial that you feed your mind on God's Word through every means—by hearing it preached; by reading, studying, memorizing and medi-

tating on it. God's Word shows us what God is like and how He wants us to live. There is no such thing as godliness apart from constant nourishment from God's Word of truth.

If you're not a reader, learn! God saw fit to record His truth in written form. Almost anyone can learn to read. That may be a necessary step in disciplining yourself for godliness. Also, get the Bible on tape and listen to it daily. If you don't have a regular time in the Word, set a realistic goal and stick with it. Start out with 15 minutes a day reading the Bible and 5-10 minutes in prayer. When you're consistent, you can increase the time. But you need spiritual nourishment from the Word as much as you need to eat. Also, we implement spiritual discipline ...

2) By being obedient to the truths of the faith (4:6).

"... which you have been following." We aren't supposed to learn God's Word so that we can win doctrinal arguments. It should change our lives. So we always should come to God's Word with the prayer, "Lord, show me how this applies to me, and enable me to obey it!" It may be a wrong attitude or thought I need to change. Maybe my speech doesn't honor God. I may need to change my behavior. The Word often confronts my selfishness.

Remember, the goal of the Christian life is not instant happiness and fulfillment. It is *eternal* joy in God, and that comes through godliness and becoming a good servant of Christ Jesus (4:6). The way to lasting joy and fulfillment is discipline unto godliness, which holds promise both for the present life and for the life to come (4:8).

Conclusion

Marla and I both had an Italian sociology professor in college who used to say, "Class, whenever I feel like exercising, I go and lie down for two hours until the feeling goes away." Many of us can identify with that! Exercise is discipline and discipline is hard work, and who likes hard work?

And yet, like it or not, discipline is essential for godliness. And godliness is essential because eternity is certain. There are no shortcuts, no easy, effortless ways to godliness. But if you have fixed your hope on the living God who is the Savior, can you do anything less than discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness?