

## **A New Year's Reminder: The Discipline of a Good Christian**

**“Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness”** – 1 Timothy 4:7

Faithful service and ministry to one another is the natural extension of personal godliness. I remember reading a book by J. Oswald Sanders years ago called *Spiritual Leadership*. In that book, Sanders says, “Spiritual ends can be achieved only by spiritual men who employ spiritual methods.” The key issue in ministry and Christian living in its essence is godliness. It is not how clever you are or how well you communicate; it is whether you know the Word of God and are leading a godly life. Our impact to each other is an overflow of those two factors.

First Timothy 4:7 says, “On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.” The English word “gymnasium” comes from *gumnazō*, here translated “discipline,” used of those who trained themselves in athletic endeavors. It implies a rigorous, self-sacrificing kind of training. In Greek culture, the gymnasium was a focal point of the city for youths between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. Since athletic ability was highly esteemed, there was usually a gymnasium in every town. The almost cultic exaltation of the body resulted in a preoccupation with exercise and athletic training and competition; much the same obsession as we see today.

Paul alluded to that cultural reality in exhorting Timothy to exercise himself for the goal of godliness, saying in effect, “If you’re going to go into training, concentrate on training your inner nature for godliness.” The word translated “godliness” is *eusebeia* and means “reverence,” “piety,” or “true spiritual virtue.” “Keep yourself in training for godliness” would be an accurate way to translate Paul’s exhortation to Timothy.

Paul understood the importance of discipline in the ministry: “I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified” (1 Corinthians 9:27). He further told Timothy: “Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier. Also if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules.” (2 Timothy 2:3–5)

As a soldier endures hardship, makes sacrifices, and cuts himself off from the world to please the one who enlisted him, and as an athlete must diligently train and compete within the rules, so must a servant of God make sacrifices in disciplining himself and confining himself to God’s standards.

Physical exercise profits little (1 Timothy 4:8). First, it benefits primarily the body. Second, it is good only for a short time. You can spend years getting yourself into shape, but as soon as you let up, you immediately start losing what you’ve worked so hard to achieve.

In contrast, “godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come” (1 Timothy 4:8). Godliness is profitable not only for the body but also for the soul. If you are ever going to make a New Year’s resolution, don’t resolve to go to the gym three times a week if you’re not also spending time in the Word of God every day and cultivating godliness. The present benefit of spiritual discipline is a fulfilled, God-blessed, fruitful, and useful life. If you practice spiritual exercise and discipline, the blessings of godliness will carry on into eternity, where our citizenship is (Philippians 3:20).

“It is a trustworthy statement deserving full acceptance” (1 Timothy 4:9) is a formula Paul used four other times in the pastoral epistles (1 Timothy 1:15; 3:1; 2 Timothy 2:11; Titus 3:8). “Deserving full acceptance” adds emphasis to his affirmation. It identifies a reliable statement or a truism that is clearly obvious. The greater benefit of spiritual discipline is an obvious truth.

It is spiritually immature to preoccupy ourselves with our bodies. Doing so betrays a limited perception of spiritual and eternal realities. It should be axiomatic in the church that Christians are in spiritual training to conform themselves to the will of God. They are not primarily in training to build up or worship their bodies.

Godliness must be the main pursuit of the believer. It is imperative that we use all the means of grace available—prayer, Bible study, memorization, meditation and retention of the Word, the Lord’s Table, confession of sin, active service, accountability, and sometimes fasting—in the discipline of godliness.

Paul says godliness is at the heart of truth (1 Timothy 6:3). It comes through Christ (2 Peter 1:3), yet we still must pursue it (1 Timothy 6:11). It brings persecution in this life (2 Timothy 3:12), yet it blesses us eternally (1 Timothy 4:8). These are the fundamental realities that should motivate the Christian as we discipline ourselves in godliness.

– Article submitted by Chuck Wetzel  
01.01.21