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The Place of Personal Discipline

HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH
GODLESS MYTHS AND OLD
WIVES' TALES; RATHER TRAIN
YOURSELF TO BE GODLY.

1 Timothy 4:7

It is possible to establish convictions regarding a life of holiness, and even make a definite commitment to that end, yet fail to achieve the goal. Life is strewn with broken resolutions. We may determine by God's grace to stop a particular sinful habit — entertaining lustful thoughts, criticizing our Christian brother, or whatever. But alas, only too frequently we find we don't succeed. We do not achieve that progress in holiness we so intensely desire.

Jay Adams puts his finger on the problem when he says, "You may have sought and tried to obtain *instant* godliness. There is no such thing . . . We want somebody to give us three easy steps to godliness, and we'll take them next Friday and be

godly. The trouble is, godliness doesn't come that way."¹

Adams goes on to show that the way to obtain godliness is through Christian discipline.² But the concept of discipline is suspect in our society today. It appears counter to our emphasis on freedom in Christ, and often smacks of legalism and harshness.

Yet Paul says we are to train or discipline ourselves to be godly (1 Timothy 4:7). The figure of speech he uses comes from the physical training that Greek athletes went through. Paul also said, "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training" (1 Corinthians 9:25). He said this was an attitude of his life, and one that each Christian should have (1 Corinthians 9:24-27). If an athlete disciplines himself to obtain a temporal prize, he said, how much more should we Christians discipline ourselves to obtain a crown that lasts forever.

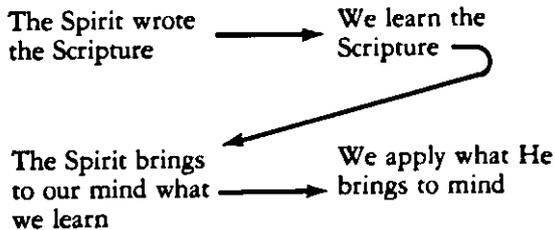
As these verses indicate, discipline is structured training. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* lists as one definition of discipline, "training that corrects, molds, or perfects the mental faculties or moral character."³ This is what we must do if we pursue holiness: We must correct, mold, and train our moral character.

Discipline toward holiness begins with the Word of God. Paul said, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). The last item he mentions is *training* or *discipline* in doing righteousness. This is what the Scriptures will do for us if we use them.

Jay Adams says, "It is by willing, prayerful and persistent obedience to the requirements of the Scriptures that godly patterns are developed and come to be a part of us."⁴

We read in Scripture, "You were taught . . . to put off your old self . . . to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22-24). Where are we taught these things? Only in the Word of God. Discipline toward holiness begins then with the Scriptures — with a disciplined plan for regular intake of the Scriptures and a disciplined plan for applying them to our daily lives.

Here our cooperation with the Holy Spirit is very clear. A diagram of our interaction with the Spirit looks like this:



The Holy Spirit has already done a good part of His work by providing us with the Scriptures to discipline us. And as we learn them, He will faithfully bring them to our minds as we need them to face temptations. As we seek to apply His Word to daily situations, He will work in us to strengthen

us. But we must respond to what the Holy Spirit has already done if we are to expect Him to do more.

So we see that we must discipline our lives for a regular healthy diet of the Word of God. We need a planned time each day for reading or studying the Bible. Every Christian who makes progress in holiness is a person who has disciplined his life so that he spends regular time in the Bible. There simply is no other way.

Satan will always battle us at this point. He will try to persuade us that we are too sleepy in the morning, too busy during the day, and too tired at night. It seems there is never a suitable time for the Word of God. This means we must discipline ourselves to provide this time in our daily schedules. I have found the early morning hour before breakfast to be the most profitable time for me to read the Bible and pray over areas of concern and need. That is also the only time of day when I can be consistent in my principal means of exercise — jogging. To do all this before breakfast requires that I get up at 5 o'clock. And since I need about seven hours of sleep each night, that means I must be in bed — lights out — by 10 P.M. That is hard to do. It can only be done by disciplining my evening hours.

Some wives may not find this time before breakfast practical, especially if they have very young children or must get the rest of the family off to work or school at an early hour. In this case they may find the time immediately after breakfast to be most suitable for time alone with God. This, too, requires discipline to take time when the responsibilities of the day are demanding attention.

Whether before breakfast or after, morning or evening, the point is we must all arrange our schedules to provide for this daily intake of the Word of God.

A disciplined intake of the Word of God not only involves a planned *time*; it also involves a planned *method*. Usually we think of methods of intake as falling into four categories — *hearing* the Word taught by our pastors and teachers (Jeremiah 3:15), *reading* the Bible ourselves (Deuteronomy 17:19), *studying* the Scriptures intently (Proverbs 2:1-5), and *memorizing* key passages (Psalm 119:11). All of these methods are needed for a balanced intake of the Word. Pastors are gifted by God and trained to teach the "whole counsel of God." Reading the Scripture gives us the overall perspective of divine truth, while study of a passage or topic enables us to dig more deeply into a particular truth. Memorization helps us retain important truths so we can apply them in our lives.

But if we are to pursue holiness with discipline, we must do more than hear, read, study, or memorize Scripture. We must meditate on it. God said to Joshua, as he was assuming leadership over Israel, "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it" (Joshua 1:8). To meditate on the Scriptures is to think about them, turning them over in our minds, and applying them to our life's situations. Few of us practice meditation on the Scriptures. Somehow the idea of meditation sounds like something medieval monks did in monasteries.

Yet Joshua, a very busy commander-in-chief of the army of Israel, was told to meditate on the law of God day and night.

The practice of meditation on the Word of God — simply thinking about it and its application to life — is a practice we develop through discipline. Most of us think we don't have time for this, but there are blocks of minutes during the day when we can meditate if we develop the habit.

I am something of a "bug" for the daily news and I enjoy listening to the news on the radio as I drive to and from work or elsewhere. One day I was challenged by the example of a friend to use that time to meditate on Scripture verses. Now I am surprised at how many minutes I can use to think about Scripture passages and their application to my life. You may not have the same opportunity I have to meditate as you drive, but if you prayerfully think about it, you will probably find other opportunities in your schedule.⁵

The objective of our meditation is application — obedience to the Scriptures. This too requires discipline. Obeying the Scriptures usually requires change in our patterns of life. Because we are sinful by nature, we have developed sinful patterns, which we call habits. Discipline is required to break any habit. If a boy has developed the wrong style of swinging a baseball bat, he cannot just decide to change instantly. He has developed a certain habit, and much discipline — much correction and training — is required to break that bad habit and develop a new one.

In the same way, our patterns of disobedience

to God have been developed over a number of years and are not broken easily or without discipline. Discipline does not mean gritting your teeth and saying, "I'll not do that anymore." Rather, discipline means structured, planned training. Just as you need a plan for regular Bible reading or study, so you need a plan for applying the Word to your life.

As you read or study the Scriptures and meditate on them during the day, ask yourself these three questions:

1. What does this passage teach concerning God's will for a holy life?
2. How does my life measure up to that Scripture; specifically where and how do I fall short? (Be specific; don't generalize.)
3. What definite steps of action do I need to take to obey?

The most important part of this process is the specific application of the Scripture to specific life situations. We are prone to vagueness at this point because commitment to specific actions makes us uncomfortable. But we must avoid general commitments to obedience and instead aim for specific obedience in specific instances. We deceive our souls when we grow in knowledge of the truth without specifically responding to it (James 1:22). This may lead to spiritual pride (1 Corinthians 8:1).

Suppose you were meditating on 1 Corinthians 13, the great love chapter. As you think about the chapter, you realize the importance of love and you also see the practical outworkings of love: Love is patient and kind and does not envy. You ask

yourself, "Am I impatient or unkind or envious toward anyone?" As you think about this, you realize you are envious toward Joe at work who seems to be getting all the breaks. You confess this sin to God, being very specific to name Joe and your sinful reaction to his good fortune. You ask God to bless him even more and to give you a spirit of contentment so that you will not continue to envy Joe, but will instead love him. You might memorize 1 Corinthians 13:4 and think about it as you see Joe at work. You even look for ways to help him. Then you do the same thing tomorrow and the next day and the next till finally you see God working a spirit of love in your heart toward Joe.

This is discipline toward holiness. You will never put to death that spirit of envy toward Joe without a definitely structured plan for doing it. That plan is what we call discipline.

You can readily see that this structured training in holiness is a lifelong process. So a necessary ingredient of discipline is *perseverance*.

Any training — physical, mental, or spiritual — is characterized at first by failure. We fail more often than we succeed. But if we persevere, we gradually see progress till we are succeeding more often than failing. This is true as we seek to put to death particular sins. At first it seems we are making no progress, so we become discouraged and think, *What's the use! I can never overcome that sin*. That is exactly what Satan wants us to think.

It is at this point that we must exercise *perseverance*. We keep wanting instant success, but holiness doesn't come that way. Our sinful habits

are not broken overnight. Follow-through is required to make any change in our lives, and follow-through requires perseverance.

Jonathan Edwards, who resolved never to do anything he would be afraid to do if it were the last hour of his life, also made this resolution: "Resolved, never to give over, nor in the least to slacken, my fight with my corruptions, however unsuccessful I may be."⁷ At first glance these two resolutions seem somewhat contradictory. If Edwards had resolved never to do anything he shouldn't do, then why talk about never giving up the fight regardless of how *unsuccessful* he might be? Was he not sincere in making the first resolution? Yes, he was sincere, but he also knew there would be much failure, and that perseverance was required. So he first resolved to seek to live a holy life, then to persevere despite the failures he knew would come.

A verse of Scripture I often use in the face of failure with my own sins is Proverbs 24:16: "For a righteous man falls seven times, and rises again, but the wicked stumble in time of calamity." The person who is disciplining himself toward holiness falls many times, but he doesn't quit. After each failure he gets up and continues the struggle. Not so with the unrighteous. He stumbles in his sin and gives up. He has no power to overcome because he does not have the Spirit of God at work in him.

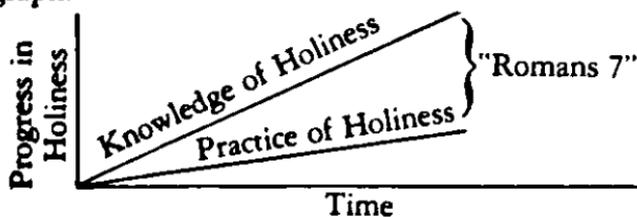
One of the chapters in the Bible we have the most trouble with is Romans 7. Christians are always trying to "get out of Romans 7 into Romans 8." The reason we don't like Romans 7 is because it

so accurately mirrors our own struggle with sin. And we don't like the idea that we have to struggle with sin. We want instant victory. We want to 'walk in the Spirit and let Him win the victory.' But God wants us to persevere in discipline toward holiness.

Some feel that such statements of Paul's as "For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do" (Romans 7:15) are too strong for a Christian walking in the Spirit. But what Christian can deny that this is often his own experience? The truth is, the more we see the holiness of God and His law revealed to us in the Scripture, the more we recognize how far short we fall.

Isaiah was a prophet of God, walking in the righteousness of God's commandments. Yet on seeing the Lord God in His holiness, he was compelled to cry out, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts" (Isaiah 6:5).

As we grow in the *knowledge* of God's holiness, even though we are also growing in the *practice* of holiness it seems the gap between our knowledge and our practice always gets wider. This is the Holy Spirit's way of drawing us to more and more holiness. This is illustrated by the following graph:



As we progress in holiness, we come to hate sin (Psalm 119:104) and to delight in God's law (Romans 7:22). We see the perfection of God's law and the rightness of all He requires of us. We agree that "His commands are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3), but are "holy, righteous, and good" (Romans 7:12). But during all this time we also see our own inner corruption and our frequent falls into sin. We cry out with Paul, "What a wretched man I am!" (Romans 7:24), and we want to give up. This we dare not do. If we would succeed in our pursuit of holiness we must persevere in spite of failure.

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- NOTES: 1. Jay E. Adams, *Godliness Through Discipline*, page 3.
2. Godliness is closely akin to holiness in Scripture. Strong's Concordance lists holiness as a synonym for godliness. Vine says godliness is "that piety which is characterized by a Godward attitude, and does that which is well pleasing to Him" (*Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, page 162).
3. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, page 325.
4. Adams, *Godliness Through Discipline*, page 14.
5. The Navigators have materials to help you develop a Bible reading plan, start systematic Bible study, and begin a Scripture memory

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program. These materials are available from your local Christian bookstore.

6. An excellent practical book on the art of meditation is *Meditation — The Bible Tells You How* by Jim Downing, available from your local Christian bookstore.
7. Clarence H. Faust and Thomas H. Johnson, *Jonathan Edwards*, page 43.