

"The Great Value of Spiritual Disciplines"

There is an inconsistency in our culture. On the one hand, there is widespread acceptance and even celebration of the idea that you are free at any time to change yourself. You can redefine and even remake yourself anyway and as often as you like. However, there is an inconsistency in that there is also a demand for tolerance for people based partly on the claim that people *can't* change and shouldn't try. According to this view, we are who we are because of things over which we have no control, like our genetic makeup or our social environment. So there is a very postmodern inconsistency that says, on the one hand, you can be whoever you want to be, and on the other hand, people can not change, and that's why we need to accept ourselves and others just the way we are.

Christian faith offers another way of looking at life. God's love is not just for certain kinds of people. You don't have to earn God's love by changing into something you are not and you couldn't earn his love if you tried. God's love is for anyone willing to receive it. When you receive Christ, you receive God's love forgiveness and acceptance in spite of past choices, present predispositions, sins or weaknesses. But Christian faith is not just or only about God loving us as we are. Christianity is also unapologetically about God enabling us to grow into what He wants us to become. Christianity starts with grace and offers us immediate love, acceptance, and forgiveness through faith in Christ, but it also tells us clearly that when we receive Christ as our Savior, we begin a new relationship with him that begins to change us from the inside out. Christian faith brings together, at the same time, the greatest assurance of love and acceptance and the greatest motivation and empowerment for growth and change.

One place you see that is in the passage we're looking at today; **1 Timothy 4:6-10**. In our larger series, we are leaving the prison epistles now and speaking for a couple of weeks from what are called the pastoral epistles, 1st and 2nd Timothy and Titus. These are called the pastoral epistles because they are written to young pastors to give

them direction for their ministries. Timothy had been left in the city of Ephesus to minister to the church there. So, it is fitting that we go from the letter to the Ephesians to the 1st letter Paul wrote to Timothy.

There are some interesting clues as to what was going on in the life of the apostle Paul during his later years.

In Philippians Paul writes from prison and says not only that he want to send Timothy to them but that he also expects to come to them soon. In Philemon, also written from prison, he says he expects to visit Colossae soon and to stay at Philemon's house. So, although he was in prison, he was expecting to be released. Then in 1 Timothy 1, something changes. He tells Timothy that he has gone to Macedonia and left Timothy at Ephesus. In Titus, he says *I left you in Crete to appoint elders*. Putting that all together, by the time of 1 Timothy, he has been released, as he had expected. He is traveling and preaching again. However, later on, when you get to 2nd Timothy, he's back in prison. In 2nd Timothy, he does *not* expect to be released. In fact, that is where he clearly says the time of his departure is at hand. He has finished his race and fought the good fight. He is expecting to be put to death.¹ The history handed down in the earliest church traditions supports this idea that Paul was free for some time after his first imprisonment and before his second and final imprisonment and death. It was during this time of freedom that he wrote two of the pastoral epistles: 1 Timothy and Titus. What was it he wanted to communicate to these young pastors and their churches? Several things, but we're going to focus on the great value of training ourselves for godliness.

The Scripture we're looking at today tells us two things. First...

I. WE HAVE A VERY CLEAR CALL FROM GOD TO TRAIN OURSELVES TO BE GODLY.

1 Timothy 4:6-8 *If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed. 7 Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; 8 for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.*

The word godliness in **verse 7** means about the same thing in Greek as it does in English. It is a life that integrates and harmonizes what you believe with how you live. It is a life of believing true things about God and living out those beliefs with consistency. It is devotion and action. It is spiritual and practical. You have a clear call and command from God. Its essence is in **verse 7**, *train yourself for godliness. Train yourself to believe the truth about God and to live in harmony with the truths you believe about God.* The words *train* and *training* here are from the Greek *gymnazo* from which we get gymnasium and gymnastics. God calls us to have an intentional approach to training ourselves for godliness.

If we look at all of the Scriptures where these words are used and think about the implications, there are five helpful observations we can make.

A. The capacity to shape our lives for patterns of behavior is inherent in our humanity and enriched by our redemption.

Everyone has a basic God-given capacity to train themselves for specific patterns of behavior. We know this Biblically. **2 Peter 2:14** talks about people who have *"hearts trained in greed."* A person can so consistently give into greed that it becomes natural, without even thinking, you just end up actually training yourself to be greedy. That's a negative example that proves a universal principle. Our choices and actions shape our lives all the time. We can change for better or worse.

The book *"The Power of Habits"* came out years ago and documented stories of people who changed their lives for the better. People who began to work on themselves and went from self-destructive binge eating, obesity, and addiction, joblessness, and debt to an all-around different lifestyle of healthy and responsible habits. The book references a scientific study at a laboratory outside of Bethesda Maryland that included psychologists, sociologists, neurologists, and geneticists. The researchers were able to examine images of the brain itself, and they saw something remarkable: one set of neurological patterns; old addictive and unhealthy habits could actually be overridden by new patterns. They could still see the neural pathways of the old behavior, but those impulses were crowded out by new

behaviors. What the researchers concluded is that even the most deep-seated habits rooted in the brain's neurological pathways are changeable. Those pathways and habits can change. This ability to change our lives is awesome, and it is God-given. If that is inherent in our humanity, then it is profoundly enhanced by redeeming grace.

Self-acceptance can be a good thing if you don't take it too far. There are certain things we all need to accept about ourselves. But if you shrug off every problem and just say: "I am what I am," that doesn't leave much hope for growth or change. Christian faith gives us a solid foundation for self-acceptance, but it also gives us a hope for significant growth in areas where we need to change and can change by the grace of God. *The capacity to shape our lives for particular patterns of behavior is inherent in our humanity and enriched by our redemption.*

B. If we don't train ourselves to be godly, we will be training ourselves to not be godly.

You get a sense of stark alternatives in **verse 7**. *Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness.* Perhaps the Scripture we just looked at from **1 Peter 2:14** makes this point even more clearly. It says if you give in to greed over and over, you train your heart to be greedy. So what this tells me is sobering and motivating. It means the choices I am making today, what I intentionally choose and what I allow to go unchallenged in my present life, all of that is training me for the future. I am building predictable patterns of behavior, reinforcing predictable reactions and habits. Unless I intentionally address my life, I am not likely to see much growth in godliness. If you will hear it, neither are you.

Here's the third thing...

C. The truth of Scripture provides us with a wholesome foundation for training in godliness.

Verse 6 talks about *being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed*. The word "good" in **verse 6** suggests something that is "healthy" or "wholesome." The word

translated "train" in **verse 6** is different than the word in **verse 7**, and it can also be translated as "nourished" or "brought up ."The Bible is healthy food for your soul. It can nourish and train you. When Paul was leaving the elders of the church at Ephesus, he said: *And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up...* (**Acts 20:32**).

Illustration: To come to the Bible for nourishment is an act of faith. If you ask me what I had for lunch last Thursday, I might not remember. If you asked me what I read in the Bible last Thursday morning, I might not remember off the top of my head. But just as sure as I am that my lunch nourished me and kept me strong through the day, in the same way, I believe my Scripture reading gave me strength and nourished me that day. To spend time reflecting on God's Word to get nourishment for life is an act of faith. It's crucial for a stronger life.

D. The essential focus for training in godliness is the actual practice of everyday godliness.

I realized this week that in the past when I have taught on this, I have focused on what are called the classic spiritual disciplines. We could include Bible reading, time alone with God, prayer, worship, fellowship with other Christians. Those things are basic to training ourselves for godliness. It occurred to me this week that the most critical training is not what you do in the gym to prepare but what you practice in the field. The book of Hebrews reinforces this. **Hebrews 5:14** says *But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.* The same word *trained* shows up here. It's talking about discernment, but I want to draw your attention to the words *constant practice*. If you want to be a runner, you don't just do leg work on the weight machine at the gym. You actually have to get out and run. It takes constant practice doing the thing itself. If you want to be a gymnast, at some point, you have to start trying to tumble. If you want to fly fish, you can't just read a book about it or build the required muscles for it. You have to grab a rod and start practicing the actual thing you want to develop. So when Scripture says train yourself for godliness, it's not just saying read your Bible and pray but having done that get out and

work at being godly in real life. You train yourself to be forgiving by actually practicing forgiveness when it's hard to forgive. You may not be good at it, but you look to God for strength and practice forgiveness. You train yourself to live by faith by choosing faith over and over again when faith is tested and needed. How do you train yourself to be obedient? Not by just always doing what comes naturally but by acts of surrender that require you to trust and obey.

E. The great challenge for training in godliness is willing submission to the discipline of God.

Hebrews 12:11 says, *For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.* God allows and even ordains for painful challenges to come into our lives. Often the greatest challenge is to trust and obey. To submit in faith to him and learn the precious lessons that can only be learned through those very difficult challenges.

The first thing this passage teaches us is that we have a very clear call from God to train ourselves to be godly. Here's the second thing...

II. WE HAVE THE STRONGEST POSSIBLE ASSURANCE THAT OUR HARD WORK HAS GREAT VALUE

Verse 8 begins, *for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. 9 The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. 10 For to this end, we toil and strive because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.* What motivates and empowers training for a life of godliness is *hope in the living God who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe.*

Notice,

A. Salvation does not come through human efforts but through hope in God.

In the Bible, the idea is never that you go into spiritual training hoping that through your training, you will achieve salvation.

Verse 10 says that Christians are people whose hope is in God. You don't hope in yourself. You hope in Him. God is the Savior for all men. That doesn't mean everyone actually receives salvation. At the end of the verse, we're told that God's salvation is received only by those who believe. God is the Savior of all men, in the sense that he is the Savior of all kinds of men, all different races and languages, He is the only Savior for men, and He offers salvation to everyone who will receive it, but his salvation is only actually received by those who believe.

Verse 10 says ***God is our Savior***. The Bible reveals that God is a Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; three persons united in one divine essence. Each person in the triune God is fully involved in your salvation. Christ died on the cross to pay for our sins and rose again to be our Lord and Savior. But the living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is fully involved in your complete salvation. **2 Corinthians 5:17-19** puts it beautifully. It says: *Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. (That's new birth, the work of God's Spirit) 18 All this is from God, (referring here to the Father) who through Christ (the Son) reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.* You do not earn the love of God. You receive it as a gift of grace. Your hope is not in yourself but in the living God, as *your* Savior.

Now,

B. This hope in God empowers you to train in and for godliness.

You see the Scripture here says that, as Christians, we are to put our hope in God, not just for eternity and for heaven but for this present life. The heart that has its hope set on the living God will be given strength to keep *toiling and striving*, as **verse 10** says, to practice godliness. I'm glad he uses the words *toiling and striving*. He's not saying we are relying on willpower. No! We hope in and rely on God, but godliness doesn't come easy to us. We have to train, to

practice, to toil even. To fall and get back up and go on. And as we do, our hope is in the living God who is our Savior!

To have your hope set on the living God means not only that you get your help from him but that you find your life in him. What motivates a mom or dad to wake up early in order to have some quiet time for prayer and Scripture before helping the kids get ready for school? The motivation is this: We labor and strive because *we have our hope set on the living God*. What motivates a Christian in the workplace to live with evident godliness and show kindness to people who are difficult and demanding? The Scripture says that in going against your natural reactions and choosing to love someone who is difficult, you are not only obeying God you are training yourself for a life that leads to a stronger and more satisfying relationship with the living God who has loved you and saved you by his grace.

CONCLUSION

If you try to train yourself for godliness, but in your heart, your real hopes for life are not in God but in other things, you aren't going to see much progress. Your attempts to practice the things that could lead you into a deeper life with God will be undercut by the fact that your real goals in life lie elsewhere.

But if you put your hope in God for this life and the life to come, and *with* your hopes for life centered on God Himself, your training will be fruitful in this life *and* in the life to come. That's the promise God gives you here. You can count on it because it is a trustworthy saying, the promise of the living God, the Savior of all men. Put your hope in him and train yourself for godliness.

Amen.

Confession of Faith

Selected Verses from Psalm 27

¹ The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?

⁷ Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud;
be gracious to me and answer me!

⁸ You have said, "Seek my face."

My heart says to you,
"Your face, LORD, do I seek."

¹¹ Teach me your way, O LORD,
and lead me on a level path
because of my enemies.

¹³ I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living!

¹⁴ Wait for the LORD;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the LORD!

A Prayer Expressing Faith in Christ

Lord, you alone are the living God, the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe. I thank you that through the death and resurrection of Jesus you freely offer me a salvation I could never earn or deserve. My faith rests in Jesus as my Lord and Savior. I thank you that through faith in him, I have a hope that not only assures me of eternal life but also inspires growth in godliness here and now. In Jesus' name, Amen.

A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal

My good and God and Savior, Forgive the foolish, indifferent, even reckless ways I have trained myself to be spiritually dull and stunted. Fill me again with a living hope that inspires me to strive for Christ-

likeness, not in my own strength, but in the power that you alone supply. I set my hope on you. Help me to live for you. Amen.

1 Compare Philippians 2:23-24, 1 Timothy 1:1-3, Titus 3:12-13, 2 Timothy 2:8-9 & 4:6-8