

LESSON 7

Developing Godly Habits

But have nothing to do with pointless and silly myths. Rather, train yourself in godliness. For the training of the body has limited benefit, but godliness is beneficial in every way, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.

— 1 Timothy 4:7–8

He went out and made his way as usual to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him. When he reached the place, he told them, "Pray that you may not fall into temptation."

— Luke 22:39–40

Godly habits are training, and their purpose is to keep us near God. Practiced week after week, they put us in the right place before the hard night comes.

The Same Pew

IN MOST CONGREGATIONS, PEOPLE SIT IN THE SAME PLACE EVERY SUNDAY. Nobody assigns the seats, and nobody would admit to owning one, but a family that has sat third from the front on the left for twenty years will feel a little lost if a visitor gets there first. The habit is so steady that it tells on us. When a regular's place is empty, somebody notices by the second song, and by Monday afternoon somebody has called to check.

That kind of steadiness is easy to make fun of, and some of it deserves it. Still, there's something in it worth noticing, because a habit is what we do without having to decide it again. It runs underneath the week and carries us to the same place whether we feel like it or not.

The last lesson was about the things we say no to. The introduction to this quarter promised one more step in Part Two: habits that make the next no easier. This week is about what we say yes to, over and over, until it becomes the way we live.

Train Yourself

Paul wrote 1 Timothy to a young preacher in a church that had been handed a set of strict rules. Some teachers in Ephesus had a program of their own: *They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods that God created to be received with gratitude*, 1 Timothy 4:3. It is the same kind of religion Lesson 6 met in Colossae, all severity and no strength.

Paul answers it with a different word. *Rather, train yourself in godliness*, 1 Timothy 4:7. *Train* is the word our English *gymnasium* comes from.³⁴ It belongs to the athlete who does the same drill a thousand times until his body knows it without being told. In Lesson 1, we heard Hebrews use the same verb for mature Christians, *whose senses have been trained to distinguish between good and evil*, Hebrews 5:14.

Notice what Timothy is told to leave alone first: *pointless and silly myths*. The church in Ephesus had people who were always chasing something new, a fresh teaching or a secret the rest of the church had not heard. Paul's cure is almost dull. He sends Timothy back to the ordinary things, done over and over, and he expects the young preacher to do them in front of everybody: *Practice these things; be committed to them, so that your progress may be evident to all*, 1 Timothy 4:15. Progress shows up in the ordinary work, done again and again.

A rule says *don't* and stops there, while training builds something one repetition at a time. The rules in Ephesus were meant to wall people off from the world; Paul's training is meant to make a person able. If we have prayed every morning for ten years, we have something to draw on in the eleventh year that a resolution cannot supply.

Limited Benefit

Paul has nothing against exercise: *For the training of the body has limited benefit, but godliness is beneficial in every way, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come*, 1 Timothy 4:8. Bodily training does some good, and the phrase *limited benefit* means good for a little, a little way or a little while.³⁵ Godliness reaches both lives, the one we are living and the one to come.

Godliness is one of Paul's favorite words in this letter. It means a whole life lived with reverence toward God, and Paul uses it only in his letters to Timothy and Titus, ten times in all.³⁶ A few lines earlier he gave it a center: *And most certainly, the mystery of godliness is great: He was manifested in the flesh*, 1 Timothy 3:16. The pattern for a godly life is a Person. So when we train ourselves in godliness, we are being shaped toward Jesus, and the habits are the practice field.

Then Paul says why anyone would bother. *For this reason we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God*, 1 Timothy 4:10. The training runs on hope. The introduction put it plainly: discipline serves the relationship, and we can keep every habit on the list and still be strangers to the One the habits were meant to bring us near.

Jesus told about a man like that. *The Pharisee was standing and praying like this about himself*, and the prayer was a list: *I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of everything I get*, Luke 18:11–12. Both habits were good, but he had turned them into a résumé, and Jesus said the tax collector *went down to his house justified*, Luke 18:14.

As Usual

Luke gives us a picture of what godly habits looked like in Jesus' life. On his last night, after the supper, *he went out and made his way as usual to the Mount of Olives*, Luke 22:39. *As usual* is the phrase for a custom, the thing a person always does.³⁷

Luke had already told us where Jesus spent his evenings that week: *in the evening he would go out and spend the night on what is called the Mount of Olives*, Luke 21:37. He had told us something else much earlier, at the start of the ministry. *He came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. As usual, he entered the synagogue on the Sabbath day and stood up to read*, Luke 4:16.

Luke puts two habits in front of us. Jesus was in the assembly on the Sabbath as usual, and he was in his place of prayer as usual. The Son of God kept a schedule. He did it in the busiest week of his life, with crowds pressing him all day, and on the worst night of his life the habit took him exactly where he needed to be.

Two Ways to Spend the Night

The disciples followed him there, so their habit got them to the right place. Then they had to stay awake.

Last week's reading asked us to count how many times Jesus told them to pray. It was twice, and both times he said the same thing. *Pray that you may not fall into temptation*, Luke 22:40. Then, when he came back and found them asleep: *Get up and pray, so that you won't fall into temptation*, Luke 22:46. Luke is gentle with them. He says they were *sleeping, exhausted from their grief*, Luke 22:45.³⁸

Jesus prayed, and the disciples slept, and within a few hours the difference showed. Earlier that same evening Peter had said, *Lord, I'm ready to go with you both to prison and to death*, Luke 22:33. He meant every word. By the time the rooster crowed he had denied three times that he knew Jesus.

Luke does not leave Peter there, and neither does Jesus. Before any of it happened, Jesus had told him, *But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And you, when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers*, Luke 22:32. Peter's prayer life gave out that night. Jesus' prayer for Peter did not. The habit that held was Jesus' habit, and Peter was carried by it until he could stand again. Resolve is real, and it doesn't hold up long in a courtyard at night. Jesus, who had spent the same hours on his knees, walked out to meet the soldiers.

That is what habits are for. Nobody builds one in the middle of a crisis. The time to learn to pray is the long string of ordinary nights before the hard one, so that when the hard one comes we are already in the habit of taking it to God.

What We Practice

So, what should our habits be? The New Testament doesn't hand us a schedule, and this lesson won't either. It does show us Jesus keeping two habits, and they make a good place to start. He had a time and a place to pray, and he was with God's people when they gathered.

Most of us already know what we ought to be doing. The trouble is that we decide it fresh every morning, and every morning there's a reason not to. A habit takes the decision off the table. It means the same chair, the same hour, the same open Bible, until skipping it feels stranger than doing it. Lesson 6 warned against making provision for the flesh. A godly habit is a provision too, laid in ahead of time for the Spirit's work in us.

Start small enough to keep it. Ten minutes kept every day will do more for you than an hour kept twice. And when you miss a day, the habit is still yours; go back to the place tomorrow. What place has God been waiting to meet you in, and how long has the chair been empty?

John tells us who else knew about the habit. *Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples*, John 18:2. Jesus' habit was so regular that his betrayer could plan around it, and he brought soldiers with torches to the spot.

Jesus knew that, and he went anyway. *Then Jesus, knowing everything that was about to happen to him, went out and said to them, "Who is it that you're seeking?"* John 18:4. He kept his habit on the night it was used against him, and it led him from the place of prayer to the cross, where he gave himself for us.

Key Concepts

Complete each statement. Answers in endnotes.³⁹

1. 1 Timothy 4:7 says, train yourself in _____.
2. 1 Timothy 4:8 says that the training of the body has _____ benefit.
3. Luke 22:39 says Jesus made his way as _____ to the Mount of Olives.
4. Luke 22:40 says, pray that you may not fall into _____.
5. John 18:2 says Judas also knew the _____, because Jesus often met there with his disciples.

Discussion Questions

Opening

1. What is one habit you have kept for years without thinking about it: a route to work, a seat, a morning routine? How did it start?
2. Think of someone you've watched keep a spiritual habit for a long time. What did you notice about them?

Core

3. Read 1 Timothy 4:1–8. Paul rejects strict rules about food and marriage, then tells Timothy to *train*. What is the difference between a rule and training?
4. Read 1 Timothy 4:10. Paul says the training runs on hope in the living God. How does motive change the way a habit feels and what it produces?

5. Read Luke 22:39–46. The disciples kept the habit of going to the place but slept instead of praying. Where are you in the right place but not doing the thing you came there to do?

Deeper

6. Read Luke 18:9–14. The Pharisee's habits were good ones. What went wrong, and how would we know if it were happening to us?
7. Read John 18:1–4. Jesus kept his habit even though Judas knew where to find him. What does that tell you about what the habit meant to him?

Journaling Prompts

15–20 minutes. Nobody reads these but you.

1. Write down how you spent the first fifteen minutes of each day this past week. No verdict yet, just the record.
2. Write about a time a habit carried you through something you couldn't have handled by deciding in the moment.
3. Choose the one habit you most want to build. Write down exactly when and where it will happen, and what usually gets in the way.

Weekly Practice

THIS WEEK. Choose a place.

Pick one place and one time for prayer and Scripture, and keep them every day this week, the same chair at the same hour. Read Luke 22:39–46 there on the first morning. If you miss a day, go back the next morning without making up for it. Be in your seat with God's people on Sunday, as usual.

Looking Ahead

Lesson 8 – When Growth Doesn't Feel Like Growth, Psalm 42; Habakkuk 3:17–18; 2 Corinthians 4:8–9

Lesson 7 asked what we keep doing. Lesson 8 asks what to do when we keep doing it and feel nothing at all.

The writer of Psalm 42 had been there, and he talked to himself about it: *Why, my soul, are you so dejected?* Psalm 42:5. Then he told his soul what to do.

Read Psalm 42 and Habakkuk 3:17–19 before the next class. In Habakkuk 3:17, count the things that fail, and notice the animal that shows up in both passages.

³⁴ *Train* is *gymnazō*, from *gymnos*, the root behind *gymnasium*. The same verb stands behind *trained* in Hebrews 5:14 and in Hebrews 12:11, where discipline yields its fruit to *those who have been trained by it*.

³⁵ *Limited* renders *pros oligon*, literally "for a little." James 4:14 uses the same phrase of a vapor that appears *for a little while*.

³⁶ *Godliness* is *eusebeia*: 1 Timothy 2:2; 3:16; 4:7, 8; 6:3, 5, 6, 11; 2 Timothy 3:5; Titus 1:1. Outside these letters the New Testament uses it only in Acts 3:12 and four times in 2 Peter.

³⁷ *As usual* in Luke 22:39 is *kata to ethos*, according to custom. Luke uses the same phrase in 1:9, where Zechariah is serving *according to the custom of the priesthood* on the day the angel appears to him. In 4:16 he uses a form of the related verb, *kata to eiōthos*, for Jesus' habit of attending the synagogue.

³⁸ Matthew and Mark say the disciples' eyes were heavy. Only Luke gives the reason, *apo tēs lypēs*, from grief.

³⁹ ANSWERS: 1. godliness · 2. limited · 3. usual · 4. temptation · 5. place