

# SOUL TRAINING

GOD IN MY EVERYTHING. KEN SHIGEMATSU. 2013 SEPTEMBER 08.



1 TIMOTHY 4:7-8

There's this guy named Craig who works as an architect, and in his particular kind of work, he has to travel a lot.

One day Craig was traveling from Germany with his business partner back to North America, and they were passing through the airport in Atlanta, in transit, when they heard the announcement that their flight back home was delayed several hours.

Well, several hours passed.

And then a few more.

And then they heard the announcement that their flight was actually cancelled.

When people looked at their watches and realized that it would be too late for them to get home that night, the anger in the concourse began to reach a fever pitch. People who were scheduled to go on the flight that had been cancelled assembled in a long line, and Craig and his business partner noticed that person after person was dumping their frustration and anger on the young woman behind the counter who was trying to get them on a flight.

When Craig reached the young woman behind the counter, he smiled and said, "I'm not going to be mean to you." Her countenance softened, and she said, "Thank you."

A little bit later, as Craig and his business partner were walking down the concourse, Craig's business partner turned to him and said, "I've known you for a long time, and if this had happened to you a year ago, you would've been enraged and you would've lit into that young woman."

And Craig says something like this: "I know that's true; but you know what? I've changed. I know who I am, and I know where I am. I am a person in whom Christ dwells, and I live in the kingdom of a God who loves me and is caring for me. I am frustrated, but I am still at peace. We'll get home tomorrow. There is nothing for us to do now, and anger doesn't help anything. I figured we might as well enjoy this unexpected turn of events."

Craig's business partner just shook his head and said, "I don't know what you've been drinking or what you've been eating, but you certainly have changed."

Craig had changed in his thinking and in his acting because, for the last year, Craig had been engaged in a series of spiritual training exercises in the context of a small group led by a teacher named James Bryan Smith. And when we are engaged in spiritual exercises, we can really change.

Now, you and I know that if we're involved in physical exercises, we'll change: We'll become healthier; we'll become stronger. This past summer our family had a reunion at Cultus Lake. My siblings from Los Angeles and San Francisco and Montreal gathered here, and one morning I did a workout with my younger brother Tetsuro, whom some of you have met; he's an artist. We get up and go to the gym, and while we're at the gym, I notice that my brother jumps up, grabs some bars above his head and proceeds to do 27 wide-grip, reverse-hand chin-ups – and that's pretty challenging, if you've ever tried to do that! I'm impressed! My brother's an artist; he's never described himself as an athlete. What's even more impressive is that not that long ago I asked my brother, "What

are you doing for exercise?” He said, “Not much. All I do – this is my goal – is get down and do one push-up per day. And I figure that once I’m down there, I might as well do two or three.” But inspired by his Tibetan friend Kalsang, my brother has been doing far more pull-ups, more weightlifting; he’s getting into good shape; and he’s far more likely to say, “This would be a good time for me to take my shirt off!”

(I don’t know if you’ve heard Matt Damon describe Matthew McConaughey’s behaviour on a movie set, but apparently, according to Matt Damon, Matthew McConaughey will say something like this pretty regularly: “Excuse me, Mr. Soderbergh, but I think this would be a mighty fine scene for me to take my shirt off in.” Matthew apparently weightlifts a lot, so he wants other people to see it, understandably!)

We know that physical exercise makes us stronger and healthier, but *spiritual* exercise changes us from the inside out.

We’re beginning a new series today on how we can experience the presence of God in every part of our lives, and we’re drawing some themes from our new book, *God in My Everything*.

Tonight, we’re going to look at how spiritual exercise changes us.

If you have your Bibles, you’re welcome to turn to 1 Timothy 4:7; the text will come up on the screen in just a moment.

The apostle Paul says to his young friend Timothy, “[T]rain yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come” (1 Timothy 4:7-8<sup>\*</sup>).

Will you join me in prayer?

Living God,

We pray that you would draw us into such a deep friendship with you; that you would so fill us with the Holy Spirit; that we would be made into people more like your son, Jesus Christ.

We pray that he and his character would become preeminent in our lives.

We pray these things in his name.

Amen.

Paul says in this text, “[T]rain yourself to be godly.” The word “train” comes from the Greek word *gymnázō* (γυμνάζω). You don’t need to be a Greek scholar to understand that that word refers to gymnasium. The apostle Paul, in this text, is suggesting that our spiritual exercises, in some ways, are like exercising in a gymnasium: They will make us spiritually stronger. And Paul says that “physical training is of some value, but godliness” – training to be like Jesus Christ – “has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.”

Now, the apostle Paul does acknowledge that physical training is of some value. Dr. James Prochaska, a researcher at the University of Rhode Island, points out that physical exercise is a kind of keystone habit because it triggers changes in other parts of our life. He points out that the research shows that for many people, physical exercise causes them to make more healthy choices when it comes to food; it makes them more productive and focused in their studies and in their work; and it leads them to feel more relaxed and less stressed out. And for some reason, people who exercise regularly tend to use their credit cards less often, which is a mystery – maybe people are just

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<sup>\*</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, *New International Version*®, NIV®.

too tired to shop, I don't know! – but that's one of the upshots of exercise.

Physical exercise surely does have benefits, but Paul was saying in this text that training spiritually to become like Jesus Christ – to become godly – has value both for this life *and* the life to come.

How does training in godliness have value for this life? Well, let's look again at Craig's example. Here's a guy who is hoping to get home. He gets stuck in the airport in Atlanta. He's told that his flight is delayed and then canceled, so he's got to stay the night in a place where he probably doesn't know anyone – and if you've ever been in a situation where your flight has been canceled in a city where you don't know anyone, you know that it's just a disturbing, anger-provoking experience. But if you can go through something *that* frustrating (for most people) and yet experience a sense of peace and even an undercurrent of joy because you've been training to grow closer to Jesus Christ, that has great value.

Last Sunday we looked at Psalm 131 as we closed out our series on the Psalms or the Songs of Ascent. We looked at that Song of Contentment and talked about how, whether you have a lot or a little by a worldly standard, if you regard everything in your life as sheer gift because of your friendship with God and you are content, then that is of great value. This is why the apostle Paul said that “[godliness with contentment](#)” is of great value (1 Timothy 6:6). The two are connected: The more godlike you become, the more content you will be – and that is something that is just priceless.

We can keep going on and on with examples of how godliness benefits us in this life. Let me share just one more.

Because you and I are human, we're going to be tempted. I'm going to be tempted. You're going to be tempted. Let's say you're in a situation where you're tempted to do something that is going to give pleasure temporarily – some short-term benefit – but it will also undermine your integrity, maybe destroy it. It will hurt a loved one, it will grieve God's heart, and you're wrestling with it. But because you've been training spirituality, with God's help, you're able to overcome that. That is something of immense value.

Paul says training for godliness has great value for all things in this life, but then he goes on to say that it also has value in *the life to come*. How so? Well, if God has come into your life and is slowly changing you, and you are sensing this new, growing desire to become more like Jesus, then that very fact is a sign – according to the apostle Paul, writing in Ephesians – that God has deposited the Holy Spirit in you, which is a kind of down-payment guaranteeing that you will enjoy friendship with God in the world to come in heaven. That is something you can't put a price tag on. So if you're moving toward godliness with the help of God, it means that you have the gift of eternal life, which benefits you not only in this life but in the life to come.

And then second – I'm going to have a hard time explaining this, so just use your imagination: The Scriptures teach that there will be continuity between who you are now and who you are becoming, and who you will be in the world to come. Who you are now and who you are becoming are going to have an impact on who you will be in the world to come.

Gordon Smith, who is the new president of our denominational school in Calgary, Ambrose University— He's over there, but he's still technically a member of our church; he wants to continue to be a member here at Tenth, but I'm not sure exactly why. But Gordon Smith, this respected theologian, in a sermon here, has said that if you don't enjoy God right now, in this life, what makes you think you'd enjoy God in the life to come? And so if, with God's help, you can cultivate pleasure in your friendship with God, you're going to enjoy the world to come a whole lot more. Who you are becoming in this life, with God's help, will have all kinds of long-range benefits in the life to come.

And then finally – again, we can keep illustrating here, but let me just offer one more example: Two weeks ago, we looked at Psalm 90 and we saw that if the favour of the Lord our God is resting upon us, if the beauty of Jesus Christ is resting upon us, then God will establish the work of our hands for us. He will establish the work of our hands. And we talked about how, even when you're not conscious of it – perhaps *especially* when you're not conscious of it – God will shine his light and love through you in a way that will impact other people's lives forever. If that doesn't infuse your life with meaning, nothing else will.

The apostle Paul says that spiritual exercises that make you like Jesus Christ have value for all things in this life but also for the life to come.

How do we actually move toward becoming a person who trains to become like Jesus Christ, like God?

Well, the first step, if you haven't done so, is to offer your life to God; to come to Jesus Christ and say, "Jesus, would you forgive my sins? I'm sorry for the ways that I have violated my own conscience and your own ideals. Would you forgive my sins and free me from them?" And that's made possible because Jesus Christ, 2,000 years ago, died on a cross for our sins, absorbing them in his body, in his Spirit, that we might be freed from them.

And then to pray, "Holy Spirit, come and fill me with yourself." And as that happens, we will be on the road to becoming more like Jesus Christ.

Paul, in 2 Timothy 1:7, says, "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity but one of power, love, and self-discipline" (ISV). Even if you don't consider yourself to be naturally disciplined, if you give your life to Jesus Christ and are filled with his Spirit, you're going to have the spirit of discipline, and you're going to have a desire to train to be like Jesus. It will be consistent with your personality, but that desire will be present.

Now, do you and I play a role in our transformation? Yes, of course. That's why Paul says "train yourself to be godly." Similarly, Peter says "make every effort to add to your faith" qualities like godliness and love (2 Peter 1:5-7).

So we do play a role, but the primary player in our becoming more like Jesus Christ is God. This is why the apostle Paul, in Philippians 2, says, "[W]ork out your salvation" – work it out! – "with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12-13 NASB). Paul is saying that God is changing your desires. God is causing you to want to act in a way that will bring him pleasure and that will do you good, so just go with it. Go with the flow of the Spirit in your life and become more like Jesus. Paul is teaching – and the Scriptures teach – that while we have a role in our becoming like God, the primary change agent in our lives is God, is Jesus Christ, is the Holy Spirit.

Let's take a moment. I know that we don't always do this right in the middle of the sermon, but would you take a moment and pray with me in your heart?

If you've never given your life to Christ, if you're not sure that your sins are forgiven, why not right now say, "Jesus, I don't understand it all, but I offer my life to you. Please forgive my sins. Please give me a new beginning"? And he'll do that.

[silence]

And if you prayed that just now or if you've prayed that before, why not also pray, "Holy Spirit, come and fill me with yourself. Fill me with you, Holy Spirit"?

[silence]

And the starting point for our becoming more like Jesus Christ is to meet Christ and to be filled with his Spirit.

And it's in Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

So, specifically, what does it look like to actually train to be like Jesus Christ?

Let me offer a couple of thoughts here.

The purpose of the spiritual exercises is not to get good at the spiritual exercises but to experience more of God's life in an actual life situation that we are in.

I know that sounds somewhat abstract, so let me illustrate from sports. Let's say you're a football player. (You can be a football player whether you're a man or a woman – there are teams for men or women – so this is, I think, a gender-inclusive illustration. *Somewhat* gender-inclusive!) Imagine you're a football player, and you're training to be better. You're in the gym, and you're bench-pressing your body weight X number of times. The reason that you're bench-pressing the weights is not so that you get better at bench presses but so that you get stronger such that, in an actual game situation, you can block someone or tackle someone – that's the reason that you're involved in these exercises.

So it is with the spiritual exercises: We don't pray so that we become awesome, eloquent prayers. We don't read the Bible so that we become – unless you want to be a professor – some amazing biblical scholar. Rather, we engage in prayer and in Bible-reading so that, in a real-life situation, we can experience more of God's life. It's important to understand that distinction.

Second of all, as is true of a wise athlete, we need to consider not only where we are naturally strong but also where we tend to be weak.

Take Michael Jordan, for example. Michael Jordan is considered one of the greatest basketball players of all time and perhaps the greatest player of his era. But when Michael was growing up, he was not considered the best athlete in his family; his brother Larry was always considered the best athlete in his family. In fact, when Michael was in high school, in tenth grade, he was actually cut from the high school basketball team because he was considered not fit to play, not good enough. This failure that Michael experienced implanted in him this urgent desire to practice and to improve the weaker parts of his game. And so when Michael went to college, his coach Dean Smith pointed out that when other players were involved in pick-up games, they would typically resort to those parts of their game that they were naturally strong at and would avoid the parts of their game where they were weaker. But when Michael was playing, even in a pick-up game without any coaches around, he was always working on the *weaker* parts of his game. As a result, he was able to slowly improve and become a more complete player.

If you're a musician – say, a pianist – you know that in order to become a more complete pianist, you must not only work on those parts of your repertoire that you are naturally good at, but you also need to practice in areas where you are weaker so that you become a more whole musician, a more whole pianist.

So it is in our spiritual lives: When we think about spiritual exercises, we'd do well to think about what would enable us to actually experience more of God in an actual real-life situation and then, second of all, to pay attention to not only our strengths but also our areas of weakness.

In my own case, one of the most important spiritual exercises for me, personally, is honouring the Sabbath. I do it because God commands it in Scripture (that's the most compelling reason), but I also do it because I am a person

who tends to overdo it – in lots of ways. I don't know if it's because I'm Asian or of Japanese ancestry, but for some reason, I have this idea in the back of my mind that if I only work hard enough, things will move forward. And there's something about honouring the Sabbath that helps me understand that the government of the world is not riding on my shoulders but on the shoulders of Jesus Christ. There's something about honouring the Sabbath that reminds me that my world is not held up by the strength or the craftiness of my hands but by the generosity of Jesus' hands. There is something about the Sabbath that frees me from needing to control everything and helps me to stand back and realize that I can live by the generosity of manna – that is, bread from heaven – falling all around me. It's such a gift, but it's also a gift that I need, given my own natural weakness.

I've shared this before but, by nature, I tend to be a very easily distracted person. You know, a thousand chimpanzees are jumping around in my head – I mean, not literally but metaphorically. Or maybe literally – who knows? Maybe you can pray for me after the service; I need healing! Because I need healing, each morning, at some point, I'll just take a brief time – maybe ten minutes; I set my timer so I'm not thinking about the time – and I'll close my eyes, breathe deeply, then use a simple word like “Jesus” or “wait” to simply focus on God. And I get distracted, but that simple word – “Jesus” or “wait” – helps me to focus a little bit more. And when I do that, I find that I'm more relaxed during the day, a little bit more focused, a little bit more conscious of Jesus.

So, Sabbath and meditation help me in my weakness.

And then third (this might seem kind of like a lame one, but I'm going to share it anyway): When I'm traveling – and I was traveling this past week in Chicago – when I'm in my hotel room, I make a practice of not turning on the TV, and here's why: A number of years ago I was traveling, and on the first night of the trip, as I often feel, I sense this loneliness and this restlessness. I'm watching TV and I channel-surf onto something that I shouldn't be watching. I channel-surf off it; I channel-surf back onto it – I really feel like I have compromised myself. From that moment forward, I said that whenever I'm in a hotel room alone, I'm never going to turn on the TV because it's an area of weakness for me.

Three practices that help me train to be a little bit more like Jesus Christ.

As I mentioned, we're in this new series and we're going to be looking at themes – various practices – from the book *God in My Everything*.

(If you haven't been here in the summer, all the proceeds from this book are going to go to World Vision, but if you can't afford it, we're glad to gift it to you. Some of us have put our own money into a fund so that we can gift it to you. If the only reason you wouldn't pick it up and read it is because you can't afford it, we'd be honoured to give it to you. Lots of people in the community are now reading it, and if you want to read along through this series, please pick up a copy after the service.)

In the book, there is this model that lists various spiritual practices, various spiritual exercises, such as Sabbath (we'll look at that likely next Sunday), prayer, spiritual friendship, channeling our sexuality, play, care for the body, working for justice – this list is obviously not comprehensive or definitive but just an example of some. But the set of spiritual practices you choose constitutes, as the shape suggests, a trellis: A trellis is something that supports our life with God.

If you've been to the Okanagan or the Napa Valley and visited some of the vineyards there, you know that a trellis supports a grapevine so that the grapevine is exposed to more sunlight, so that it can be pruned, so that it can be guided in its growth, so that it is able to produce more fruit. A set of spiritual exercises or spiritual rhythms simply serves as a trellis that exposes us more to the sunlight of God, so to speak, so that we can be pruned, so that our life can be simplified, so that our growth can be guided, so that we experience more of the fruit of God's character in

our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control. And who wouldn't want more of these qualities in their life?

Now, sometimes when we talk about our trellis or our set of spiritual practices here at Tenth, we'll describe the trellis as a "rule of life." That's the way the ancient monks describe their trellis, but don't let the word "rule" scare you if you're hearing this expression for the first time. I know the word "rule" can sound kind of rigid, harsh and cold, but the monks used the word "rule" drawing on its root meaning, which means trellis. So when the monks and when we talk about our "rule of life" or "rhythm of life," we're really talking about a trellis that supports our life with God so that we're exposed more to the light of God, more to his sun, more to his fresh wind that restores us and enables us to exhibit love, joy and peace in our lives.

Now, the point of the trellis is not to build a beautiful trellis. This here is a beautiful trellis. (I didn't build it.) It happens to be well crafted, but the point is not to build a great trellis; rather, it's simply to support our life with God. The point of the spiritual exercises is not to become great prayers or great pastors but to simply have some simple practices that support us in our friendship with Jesus Christ. A trellis – a rhythm or rule of life – should never feel like a set of extra things that we need to do.

To shift the analogy just a little bit, I like to think of my trellis – my rhythm of life – a little bit like sailing. I love to be in or on the water, kayaking or sailing, and I certainly don't see that as an extra thing to do in my life. The other day someone came by my office and said, "I'm trying to raise some money for a Christian camp here in British Columbia. I've been able to secure some world-class wines at a really good price. We're going to auction them off to raise money for this camp, and I'm wondering if you would be willing to ride on our family yacht. We can say that we're offering a sailing trip with Ken Shigematsu that we can auction and people can bid for." And he was kind of apologetic, saying, "I know how busy you are, and I hate to ask you to do this. I'm really sorry, but this is for such a good cause. Would you consider sailing on our family yacht to raise money for this great cause? Please? I'm sorry to ask you." And I'm like, "Are you kidding me? I would love to do it! I don't care about the fundraiser. When can we go?" Because, I'm telling you, for me, sailing or being on the water doesn't feel like something I *have* to do but something I *get* to do. It is life-giving.

So it is with my simple trellis: It feels like, "Oh, I'm getting to experience more of the sunlight of God, more of the wind of the Spirit that I so desperately need." It makes me alive.

If, as you're building it, your trellis – your set of spiritual practices – begins to feel really heavy and begins to weigh you down, then *you've* likely built it and the Spirit likely has *not* built it. That's a sign that you're overdoing it.

Let me offer just a few closing comments as we come down to the home stretch of this message.

As you think about a set of practices for this coming year – in the fall or the spring – think about your actual life situation and think about what would enable you to experience more of God in that actual life situation. Think about your temperament and your life circumstance. If you're preparing for an Ironman Triathlon, you're probably not going to be led to fast for 40 days in a row. If you're about to become a mother and you've got a young child, you're probably not going to be able to pray for long hours in the morning with a little one crying and breastfeeding – unless you've got nannies who nurse, it's probably not going to happen. (I guess they've had that in history; I don't know why it came to mind now!) The point is to consider your life situation. You're going to have a set of practices, whether you intend them or not; do your practices actually support or sabotage your friendship with God?

Second – and this is really important if you're hearing this for the first time; I know I've taught on this from time

to time, but some of you are new: When you're thinking about your trellis – your set of spiritual practices – the most common mistake is to try to do way too much all at the same time and just feel like, “Oh, this is so heavy!” and get burned out and stop. James Bryan Smith says something really wise; he says that for your trellis, for your rhythm or rule of life, it's best to pick maybe three practices: one practice that lifts you up to God, another practice that nourishes you— For me, it's being in the water or on the water. For you, it might be listening to beautiful music, watching a beautiful film, reading a novel or doing yoga – something that nourishes you. Even if the activity feels not very spiritual, not very religious, if you're feeling more alive over time, I'm telling you, it is a spiritual practice. And then third— So, one that really draws you to God, one that nourishes your soul, and then third: one that leads you to others in connection or in service. Wise counsel. Keep it simple.

And then finally, seek to do at least one of your spiritual practices or spiritual exercises with someone else – maybe a friend or a family member. When it comes to physical exercise, the number one indicator as to whether you'll continue in your routine is whether you have some friends who are encouraging you along the way. The University of Pittsburgh has this weight-loss intervention program that requires everyone who enrolls to sign up with a family member or a friend, and part of the program involves the family members or the friends getting together for meals, calling each other. And here's the thing: After a ten-month follow up, an impressive 66% of the people who enrolled with a friend or a family member maintained their weight-loss compared to only 24% of a control group who enrolled in a program without a friend or a family member. If you want to get into better shape physically, the best shot you have at maintaining your program is if you have some friends who are cheering you on – and the same is true spiritually. The best shot that you have of growing toward godliness is to have a friend or two praying for you and walking with you.

And that's why this coming year, from September through June, we're going to be emphasizing this theme called Life Together.

A few years ago we did Practicing the Presence, where we invited folks in our community to commit to regularly, prayerfully reading the Scriptures; 1,200 people signed on. We followed that with an emphasis called Sharing the Presence, about sharing our faith in deed and in Word – a little bit more challenging, but over a thousand people signed on.

This coming year the emphasis is going to be on Life Together. One of my colleagues, Ken Pierce, who oversees our small group ministries, says that life is simply better together – sometimes harder, but it's richer. And life with God is certainly richer together. So consider pursuing a spiritual practice with a friend, maybe a family member. Some people have told me they're reading *God in My Everything* with their sister or brother or a friend. Consider the possibility of joining Alpha if you are newer to faith or if you have a friend who's exploring. Or maybe Foundations, which is a great leadership development program we have here for people who want to serve Christ more fruitfully. Or maybe consider joining a small group.

And together – *together* – let's learn what Paul means when he says, “[T]rain yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.”

Let's together know what it is to experience God in our everything.



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## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What role does the Holy Spirit play in our transformation?
- How does training foster the work of Jesus in our lives?

## RECOMMENDED READING

Shigematsu, Ken. *God in My Everything*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013.

Smith, James Bryan. *The Good and Beautiful Life: Putting on the Character of Christ*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009.

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