

Celebration of Discipline

1 Timothy 4:6-10

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Dan Hoffman

If I say the word “discipline” what jumps into your head?

[Input]

Today we are beginning our summer series which I have titled “Celebration of Discipline.” Now this, I think, is a bit of a strange title as celebration is not normally a word we associate with discipline.

Indeed I grew up in a family like many of you where most of the time discipline meant severe discomfort to a certain hind-quarterly region. And being the oldest of three kids my hind-quarterly region was the one that suffered most while my parents’ idealistic expectations of how kids should act wore off. By the time my younger brother came along my sister and I had lowered their expectations so far that he hardly got to enjoy any discipline at all – yet somehow he turned out alright. But from my perspective I can assure you that when discipline was the subject, “celebration” was not what I was thinking until much later in life.

And of course this lines up with scripture. The writer of Hebrews penned the words:

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. (Hebrews 12:11)

And it is this harvest of righteousness and peace that is worthy of celebration and will be the focus of this series on discipline. To this end Richard Foster, the author of the book that inspired this series says “Joy is the keynote of all the disciplines.”¹ Joy! Discipline leads to joy.

So as we get started my encouragement for you is to tie two ideas together in your head that perhaps have never been tied together before. Tie the idea of discipline to celebration and joy.

[Pray]

Please open your Bibles to 1 Timothy chapter 4. If you are using a pew Bible you will find it on page 840.

Today the idea that is going to drive the direction of this sermon comes at the end of verse 7 in our text today where Paul says “train yourself to be godly”

¹ Foster, Richard. “Celebration of Discipline” (New York: HarperCollins Pub. Co.), 1998. pg 2

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But those words come in a context so let me establish it for you. Timothy was a third generation Christian that the Apostle Paul had chosen to pastor the church in Ephesus. He was noted for being young, so he was probably in his twenties when Paul wrote this yet Paul was happy to choose him for this position and give him a very significant job. Earlier in the book Paul told Timothy:

As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer.
(1 Timothy 1:3)

That was Timothy's job in Ephesus. Now bringing truth to a congregation is a big responsibility for any preacher, so Paul didn't just throw Timothy into this and walk away. He mentored him, and 1st Timothy is one of the mentoring letters Paul sent.

In the letter Paul instructed Timothy on what a worship service is supposed to be like in church, what kinds of people he was to choose as elders and deacons, how people like slaves and widows should be treated and how to avoid the love of money – all really important topics. But in the middle of his letter, in chapter 4 verse 7, Paul encourages Timothy and us not to lose sight of something much more important than anything we could ever do for God and instead urges us to become like God. He says “train yourself to be godly.”

Now training yourself to be godly might sound a bit funny at first. I mean are we supposed to earn something from God in order for Him to accept us? That would be terrible news as there is nothing I can earn on my own but condemnation.

Or it might sound a bit like Paul is encouraging us to practice being something we aren't – train yourself to be godly when in fact you aren't. TV is full of actors who have trained for particular roles so that we believe they really are who they say they are. Does Paul want us to put on airs to convince ourselves or perhaps God that we are more than we really are?

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Actually no. The godliness Paul urges Timothy and us to pursue is neither a call to pursue works righteousness or to become something we aren't. And so to understand what Paul is talking about we need to start by understanding what “godliness” is.

The dictionary defines “godliness” as “coming from God”² or being like God and this lines up perfectly with how the Bible defines it.

Back in the very first chapter of Genesis we get the account of God creating people. It says:

² <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/godly?s=t>

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26-27)

So people were created to be like God, we were created in God's image, we were created godly. And so first that means that our potential to be godly comes from God, godliness isn't something we create for ourselves, it is a God given ability that humans have. You can look like God.

Of course you remember that Adam and Eve weren't in the garden long before they caved in to temptation and shattered the perfect image of God they were created to be. But when they became sinners they weren't proving their humanity, they were breaking their humanity.

And so second the call to pursue godliness is not a call to become something we aren't, it is actually a call to return to something we were. We have been deceived into believing that to be human is to be sinful, but actually to be human is to be godly. The more we are like God the more human we are.

And so Paul urges Timothy and us to train ourselves to become what we were created to be.

The word "train" here is the Greek word *gumnaze* from which we get the word gymnasium. So Paul is painting a picture of strenuous effort, like that professional athletes endure, to achieve their full potential.

Tom Landry was an NFL football player who became one of the greatest and most innovative coaches of all time. He led the Dallas Cowboys to record breaking victories for 29 years – that's a really long time to be a coach of one team. But they kept him because he knew what it meant to take talent and turn it into a winning machine.

Of course to be a great coach requires an incredibly strategic mind and the ability to teach, but Landry described his job quite simply saying "The job of a football coach is to make men do what they don't want to do, in order to achieve what they've always wanted to be."³

³ <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/d/discipline.htm>

Does that resonate with you? Now of course the idea of discipline doesn't sound fun to any of us, but are you someone who longs to achieve something you've always wanted to become? Do you hunger for your full potential as a son or daughter of God? Do you desire for the snares of sin which so easily entangle you, whether that is anger or lust or unfaithfulness or over-indulgence or selfishness or whatever it might be for you, do you desire to leave those tangles behind in order to look like Jesus? Do you?

If you do then training yourself in the spiritual disciplines is what you want. Godliness is **your** God given potential, and it is who you were created to be. And so over the next six weeks we are going to look at six different exercises we can take on to become what we were created to be.

But today, because this is an introductory sermon, I want to stay a little more general and look at how training ourselves to be godly works. And Paul gives us three steps to this training process in 1st Timothy.

First, look with me at verse 6.

[Read 1 Timothy 4:6]

Paul here encourages Timothy to be a good minister... Alright you say, good for Timothy, how does this apply to the rest of us?

That's a good question, I'm glad you asked.

Actually the word "minister" here is usually translated "servant" and is a word that is used to describe all Christians, not just pastors. Jesus uses the same word when He said:

If anyone **serves** Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there will My **servant** be also. If anyone **serves** Me, the Father will honor him. (John 12:26)

So really Paul's instruction here teaches all of us how to be servants or ministers of Jesus. So turn to the person beside you and say "Jesus and Paul call you a minister".

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Now Paul doesn't just want Timothy to be a minister, he wants him to be a good minister of Christ Jesus pointing out the errors of false teaching to those around him. And so in the second half of verse 6 Paul tells Timothy he can become this by being "nourished on the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed."

To be godly we need to keep nourishing ourselves on the truths of the faith, or we need to keep ingesting Scripture into our bodies. That means reading scripture regularly, memorizing scripture and meditating on Scripture. That is

how we are going to know the difference between truth and error in our own lives as well as the lives of those around us. So get into your Bible.

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Now, do you ever feel like sometimes the steps God calls us to perform seem mundane and unlikely to bring about the remarkable results we desire? We want to be great men and women of God, but regular Bible reading doesn't seem like it will get us sensational results. Sometimes I feel like if God would ask something great then I would be more likely to take on the challenge in order to achieve what He wants for me.

Like if God would say to become a great hero of faith spend a month fasting in a monastery, or climb to the top of Mt. Robson to pray and I'll meet you there and change you to look like me. But read the Bible? I've already read the Bible. Isn't there something more dramatic I could do?

Do you ever feel that way?

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I think many of us are inclined to thinking like this because at our root we want to earn something from God. We want to do something great and then get a great reward.

It's like Naaman the leprous army commander who came to Elijah looking for healing. But instead of being given a great task, Elijah just sent his servant out to tell Naaman to wash in the Jordan River. It's not really surprising that:

Naaman went away angry and said... "Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage.

Naaman's servants went to him and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed'!" So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy. (2 Kings 5:11-14)

The spiritual disciplines the Bible calls us to train ourselves with are all unimpressive and gloriless acts. Things like: reading your Bible or praying or memorizing scripture or fasting. If you do these things no one will think you are a hero, but slowly you will find yourself transformed into God's image.

And so the first thing Paul calls us to is something everyone can do; nourish ourselves in the Scriptures. This is the first step towards training yourself to be godly.

Look now at verse 7.

[Read 1 Timothy 4:7]

The second step to training ourselves to be godly requires avoiding the pitfalls on the journey to godliness.

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Now there are two things Paul mentions here, godless myths and old wives' tales. Both of these had begun to shift the spotlight in the church in Ephesus away from the Gospel, away from a focus on Christ and His kingdom, and as a result had led them away from godliness rather than towards it.

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Now wives' tales are things that are generally believed to be true but actually hold no truth. Tell me if you have heard or used these:

“Don't sit too close to the TV or it will damage your eyes.” Actually no studies have shown any connection between sitting too close to the TV and bad eyesight. It is believed this tale originated because children were blocking the vision of those sitting behind them. And now we all sit just over a foot away from our computer monitors.

Or “Eat carrots to improve your vision.” This wives' tale started in World War 2 to stop the Germans from finding out why the British Air Force was able to see so clearly at night. Of course radar was the real reason.

Or “Don't go outside in the winter with wet hair or you will catch a cold.” In reality the only way to catch a cold is to come in contact with a cold-virus which are just as common in summer as in winter. Now people do tend to catch more colds in winter, but not because we are out in the cold, but rather because we spend more time indoors touching things like door handles that other sick people have touched.

Now generally people tell wives' tales in order to encourage a particular action or get a desired result – move away from the TV, eat your vegetables, dress responsibly. And while these ends might be good they are achieved by falsehood rather than truth.

And so when it came to trying to be godly there were some wives' tales that Paul warns Timothy to teach against. In verse 2 Paul says

Such teachings come through hypocritical liars.... They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. (1 Timothy 4:2-3)

This will make you godly, don't get married and don't eat chocolate or drink alcohol and then you are good. But the truth is these practices don't have anything to do with godliness at all.

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Now hold on, what was wrong with what these people were saying? After all Paul told the Corinthians:

Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. (1 Corinthians 7:8)

And Jesus talked about fasting in the Sermon on the Mount. So aren't these people teaching the same things?

Not quite. The difference is small but very important. What Paul and Jesus were teaching were principles in self-control used to train ourselves to be godly. In the same passage Paul says there is nothing wrong with marriage, just that singleness meant he could serve the Lord undistractedly. And Jesus did not teach that eating food, or certain foods, was wrong, but rather that giving ourselves to periods of fasting could benefit our relationship with God.

But what these teachers were doing was saying that certain actions like staying single or not eating a particular food actually had some magic like quality to them such that if you did them you would become godly. Paul says these are wives' tales.

In a similar way Paul warned Timothy about godless myths saying:

Command certain people not... to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God's work—which is by faith. (1 Timothy 1:3-4)

Now here think conspiracy theories or Bible teaching that focuses on side issues that aren't very important but that people can get really excited about. So perhaps you have met people who spend most of their energy reading the book of Revelations and focusing on the end times.

Now I believe in the book of Revelations, but I have seen people base their entire faith, all their Bible reading and study, speculating on theories of how things might happen at the end of the world. All these people talk about is how the current conflict in Israel means we are getting close to the end or whether Jesus will come back before the tribulation or after the tribulation or during the tribulation. Or whether the Beast is the Pope or the President of the United States or whoever.

But this kind of passionate interest leads to what Paul calls "controversial speculation" not to godliness.

Godliness comes when our focus and passion is centered on the Gospel that Jesus came and died to save sinners so that we could rejoice in the power of

new life now and never-ending life after death. There is nothing sensational or secret about the Gospel but when we give ourselves to it, it leads to godliness.

So in order to train ourselves to be godly we must nourish ourselves in the Scriptures, and we must avoid the pitfalls like spiritual wives' tales or godless myths.

So ask yourself when it comes to my faith what sits at the center of my passion. Am I focused on increasing Christ's glory and expanding His kingdom or am I focused on things that actually lead me away from the Gospel and godliness and into controversy? Paul says train yourself to be godly.

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The final step in training ourselves to be godly found in this passage comes in verse 8 where Paul says we need to trust the promises of godliness. Look at verse 8.

[Read 1 Timothy 4:8-9]

Perhaps you didn't know that godliness comes with a two-part promise: one for today and one for eternity.

Paul says as we give ourselves to the spiritual disciplines, training ourselves to be godly, we gain a two-fold promise from God, one part for this life and one for the life after.

Now the promise of eternity and the joy there seems to make sense to us. We know that if we receive Jesus' gift of salvation, and discipline ourselves to follow Him as obedient disciples, then we will get to enjoy eternity. But sometimes eternity seems too distant. It can feel like what God calls us to is to give up everything good and fun now so that we can enjoy eternity later. But that isn't really what Paul says here at all. And it is the first part of the promise of godliness that makes this clear.

Here I want to return to where we began with the quote from Richard Foster, the author of the book titled "Celebration of Discipline." He said "Joy is the keynote of all the disciplines."⁴ Joy is what all the disciplines are about.

That means that when we give ourselves to becoming as human as possible by looking as much like God as possible, the result is joy right now and for eternity. Now that doesn't mean that waking up early to read your Bible is going to be fun, but as you train yourself to be godly the result is you find yourself living the life you were created to live and this results in joy.

⁴ Foster, Richard. "Celebration of Discipline" (New York: HarperCollins Pub. Co.), 1998. pg 2

Paul agrees with Coach Landry, to become what you've always wanted to be you have to train yourself in ways you don't necessarily want to... but it's worth it. Look at verse 10.

[Read 1 Timothy 4:10]

Paul says the promise of joy that godliness brings is worth the labor and strife we have to put in to achieve it. So get joy Paul says, by training yourself to be godly. And do this by giving yourself to continual nourishment in the Scriptures, avoid the pitfalls of pseudo-godliness like myths and wives' tales, and allow yourself to be motivated by the two-fold promise of godliness.

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As we come to a close let me ask you, do you need this? Would your relationship with Jesus benefit from an increase in discipline on your part? Has your relationship with God dwindled to a habit that happens one day a week but doesn't result in much joy? Do you find it hard to read your Bible or pray or gather together with other believers regularly?

Perhaps have you fallen into the trap of thinking that godliness isn't worth giving up the sin you find yourself trapped in?

Just like athletes have to put themselves through training that isn't particularly enjoyable in order to realize their full potential, so a joy-filled relationship with Jesus requires training in godliness.

Today we looked at the discipline of reading scripture, so I have put a 60 day challenge on the back of the prayer sheet in your bulletin. If you don't currently have a plan for your scripture reading or perhaps haven't read much of the Bible at all lately how about giving yourself to 10 minutes of reading every day for the next 60 days?

Here is the challenge, if you are committed to giving this a try tell someone you love on your way home from church today that you are going to give this summer to training yourself to be godly.