

The Spiritual Disciplines Of The Christian Life:
Introductory Lesson: On Your Mark, Get Set ... Grow!



Introduction

Discipline. That word leaves most of us with a cold chill. Why? Because most of us can recall several experiences in our lives where discipline was anything but a pleasant experience! As a child, discipline was usually associated with some sort of punishment for violating a household rule. In school, you may recall having heard your P.E. teacher or a coach use the word "discipline" in the context of a sentence that went something like this: *"Today you are going to learn how about discipline and getting into tip-top physical condition."* And that was the last thing you could remember! Your next recollection was waking up in a stretcher after having collapsed on the third lap of a mile run. A few years ago, my oldest son, Jeremy, came home after basketball practice one day and described to his mother how the coach had made his basketball team run a series of very difficult wind-sprints they call *"the killer."* After describing all the torture he went through, he turned to her and said: "Wow Mom, I've never had this happen to me before. Both ankles hurt so much-I don't even know which one to limp on." Of course, the most infamous experience of discipline any of us could face is in the military where drill instructors appear to delight in dishing out discipline that in any other context would readily be confused with torture—if not cruel and unusual punishment!

Others of you may have experienced another context for discipline. You may have been nurtured in a spiritual environment where discipline was the order of the day. Rules, rules, and more rules. I have been in organizations that had a rule for just about every situation imaginable. And while their motives may have been honorable, their emphasis became overbearing. Worse yet, it can become easy to assume that godliness comes about by simply maintaining a spiritual checklist of *"do's and don'ts."* We call that *"legalism."* And it is a word that evokes some fairly negative responses from people who have been burnt by that sort of approach to the Christian Life.

And what about our contemporary culture? We all like to watch disciplined athletes perform well in everything from basketball to ice skating—but who wants to do all *the work that is essential to make it happen?* We have more and more kids playing games and sports on X-Box or Play Station and less and less playing the actual sports. I heard a definition of football that goes something like this: *"22 men on a field desperately in need of rest and 70,000 people in the stands desperately in need of exercise!"* Do I need to remind you that Americans are in the worst physical shape than any other country in the industrialized world? For all these reasons, the word, discipline has fallen on hard times. Right up there in popularity with having an IRS audit or getting your wisdom teeth extracted. So *why* are you *here?*

If you know anything about God's Word, you have heard the word "discipline" used in the Scriptures. And not just *once or twice*. Can you think of any passages that talk about discipline and the Christian life? Let's check out a key passage on this:

1 Timothy 4:6-8—"Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly." The word, 'train' (NIV) is lit. "exercise" (gumnazo) or "discipline." Discipline is somehow linked with godly living. If you look a little closer, you might notice what follows: "Train yourself to be godly (lit. "**toward godliness**")—The word translated "toward" indicates a **movement or orientation toward someone/ something**.¹). NASB translates it: "...discipline yourself *for the purpose of* godliness." One of the problems is that many of us have made the mistake of confusing discipline **with** godliness! And that will inevitably lead to legalism and self-righteousness. I am more spiritual than so-and so because I read my Bible *three times as long as he does*. Discipline for the purpose of discipline will not make you godly. It can make you proud! But that is not what God intends for it to do. Rather, discipline is what is supposed to aim you in the *direction* of godliness. "Training" is what provides you with *structure* or a *plan to move toward* godliness. It is not an end in itself. It is a means to a greater end. Do you see the difference? So as you go through Don Whitney's study of the Scriptures, you will see that the emphasis does not fall on discipline-but on *godliness*. That is God's goal for the believer (Romans 8:28-30: Justification, sanctification, glorification). The *disciplines* of the Christian Life happen to be *part* of the means that God uses to grow us in *godly living*.

Let's see if we can't tweak our understanding of the word a little further. Remember, we more naturally tend to focus on the difficulties associated with that word. And if all we focus on are the difficulties, we will either quit and give up---or become obsessive, proud, and self-righteous. The fact is, if your parents cared at all for you, their goal in disciplining you was not (should not) have been to inflict pain in order to get even with you. (That by the way is not discipline. That's called "revenge!") Their goal was (or should have been) to get your attention, to help you begin to realize that the direction you were going in was wrong and even harmful, and to help get you going in the right direction. That's what God does with us (Hebrews 12: 10-11).

The same is true with a good coach. You are thinking the guy wants to kill you when he has you run those wind sprints. He is thinking about the conditioning that is necessary to win a close game in the fourth quarter where the deciding factor in the outcome is the team that has had the best conditioning. *Discipline means doing things you don't necessarily or immediately enjoy doing so you can rejoice in the later outcome of the task*. It is an act of faith inasmuch as you are doing something with no immediate payback-but you do so based on the belief that the eventual outcome will bring *greater gain* than your *present pain*. Your parents may have known that. Your coach probably believed that. And your Lord certainly knows that.

Discipline requires daily sustained effort. It requires perseverance. Think again about sports. What does it take to be a good athlete? A good baseball player? A skillful basketball player? A proficient ice skater? Practice. Do you think the Christian life is any different?

You might be thinking: "Doesn't God do all that for you? Isn't He the ultimate **cause** of your godliness?" Yes! But He designs not only the *end* or the goal of the Christian life-but the *means* as well. "*Train yourself to be godly*." Ultimately, God brings about your godliness—but not **apart from** your discipline. He does it **through** your obedient discipline. A discipline that gets you into His Word, meditating on His Word, praying for insights and wisdom to understand and do His Word, sharing His Word with others-and so on.

¹Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature*. (3rd ed.) (874). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

But why is this necessary? Aren't we new creatures after we get saved? The old has gone-the new has come (II Cor. 5:17). Yes we are. The new birth means that we have been given a new heart or disposition toward God. We now have the capacity to love him and our neighbor-instead of being enslaved to only loving ourselves. We have been freed from the tyranny of sin and now have the freedom to serve God as His dear sons and daughters. But the same Scriptures that tell us that also tell us that we bring the baggage of our old life in Christ into our new life. (That is called a "*sin hangover.*") And so the Scriptures call us to put off the old man (old ways of thinking and responding) and to put on the new man (God's righteous ways of thinking and responding). It is a *two factored* process. Put off/put on. Get rid of the old and replace it with the new. And how do you suppose we do that? It starts with a commitment to renovating your mind (v. 23). And that is where the spiritual disciplines play such a crucial role.

Objection: It still sounds a bit legalistic to me. I don't want to be practicing the disciplines just to be "practicing the disciplines?" How can I avoid being like the Pharisees of Jesus' day who used some of these very disciplines to prop up their own standing before the people? (See Matthew 6). How can I get past the drudgery phase where I am just "doing them to be doing them?"

A critical mindset to cultivate is a realistic understanding of just *how needy we are!* When you understand your *real* condition, not only do you avoid a legalistic mindset, but you actually build some healthy motivation for *using the disciplines* of the Christian life. Some key passages that under-gird a theology of discipline:

- Proverbs 3:5-6—*Trust in the LORD* with all your heart, (which is contrasted with the way of folly in the next phrase) And do not lean on your own understanding. In *all your ways* acknowledge (personal knowledge of Him) Him, And He *will make your paths straight* (a metaphor that says God will keep your conduct in the boundaries of His moral will). The implication is that there is something within us that causes us to drift off course? What is that?
- Jeremiah 17:9! Read it. (see also verses 5-8). A similar passage is found in...
- Psalm 1:1-3 But this is all OT! Emphasis does not change! Look at...
- Romans 7:21—Paul acknowledges the power of indwelling sin and the need for daily appropriating the Gospel message to ourselves. And finally...
- John 15:6—Must be vitally connected to the Vine—or we can produce nothing of lasting value.

Do you get the point? Discipline is not about earning “brownie points” with God. Biblical discipline is a practical expression of our *great need!!* Discipline is not *antithetical to dependence*-as some try to make it. Rather it helps us to live out our dependence on the Lord. Discipline is more like a hose is to an oxygen tank. Like a fork is to food. Like a glass is to water! (Illustration: A friend from Newfoundland who recently and powerfully illustrated this to me and my wife. She went through some enormous trials. We watched God transform her from someone who was obsessed with anxiety to someone who was calm and learning to delight in the Lord. How? Through her determination to not let go of God's promises with which she regularly renewed her mind and through which she overcame her unbelief).

This course is not designed for spiritual green berets. It is not designed to make you a professional Christian. It is designed to connect you to the source of your spiritual life. It is designed to help you learn how to nourish your starving soul that was made to find its joy and strength in the Living God. If you want to really take a step of growth this summer, I believe this study can be a significant help to you.

Suggestions for getting the most out of this class:

1. Read each chapter-at least once.
2. Answer the questions and self-evaluations that go with each chapter.
3. Decide what you are going to do first. Don't try doing too much all at once.
4. Find an accountability partner to encourage you in reading the book-and in working on one or two areas you want to work on during the course.
5. Consider sharing with others how your study and application is effecting your "quest for godliness."
6. Make I Timothy 4:7 your theme verse.

Questions for Chapter One's study (To be completed by next week).

1. Can you think of a time when you disciplined yourself in order to reach a goal, or when you did not discipline yourself-and failed to reach the goal?
2. In the past, how have you felt about the spiritual disciplines mentioned in this book-like Bible reading, prayer, worship, evangelism, fasting? Be honest!
3. Can you recall the three "catalysts" that God uses in our lives to make us more like Christ? List them.
4. Name two Bible examples that Dr. Whitney used to illustrate putting ourselves in the path of Jesus. How do these examples encourage you to seek the Lord?
5. "Freedom comes through the mastery of any discipline..." How is this so? Can you think of some examples where this could work in your life?

Focus on God's great love for you-a love that moves Him to provide us with these disciplines in order for us to know Him and become like Him. Look over the chapter titles and begin praying that God will use this course to help you take a significant step in your walk with Him.