



Discipline With Direction

1 Tim. 4:7; Gen. 32

1 Timothy 4:7 Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train (discipline) yourself to be godly. (NIV)

Today, the first Sunday of the year, I want to start a series on Spiritual Growth. Each year we do this, and I feel it is probably one of the more important series that I do.

The bottom line is that I would like you and me to desire to and also to achieve a deeper spiritual life this year. I am addressing this message to those who are believers in Jesus Christ. If you are not, I hope it will be, even today.

There are some real dangers in a series like this. For example, when you talk Spiritual disciplines, like having a consistent quiet time of Bible reading and prayer, one of the first inner responses to that in this is probably guilt.

Let's start with a story that I hope will set the right motivation for what we will do. Because this is not about what we "ought to do" but it should be about what we "want to do", what we "long to do". The difference is "DIRECTION."

Discipline without direction is drudgery.

Imagine six-year-old Kevin, whose parents have enrolled him in piano lessons. After school every afternoon, he sits in the living room and reluctantly plays "Home on the Range" while watching his buddies play baseball in the park across the street. That's discipline without direction. It's drudgery.

Now, since everyone has seen "It's a Wonderful Life" at least once this season,

let us suppose Kevin is visited by an angel (second-class) during piano practice. In a vision Clarence the angel takes him Carnegie Hall. He's shown a pianist giving a concert.

Usually unmoved by classical music, Kevin is astonished by what he sees and hears. The musician's fingers dance excitedly on the strings with fluidity and grace. Kevin thinks of how stupid and klunky his hands feel when they halt and stumble over the keys. Kevin remembers the toneless, irritating sound that comes from his playing.

But Kevin is enchanted. He drinks in everything. He never imagined that anyone could play the piano like this.

"What do you think, Kevin?" asks the angel.

The answer is a soft, slow, six-year-old's "W-o-w!"

The vision vanishes, and the angel is again standing in front of Kevin in his living room. "Kevin," says the angel, "**the wonderful musician you saw is actually you in a few years.**" Then pointing at the piano, the angel declares, "But you *must* practice!"

Suddenly the angel disappears and Kevin finds himself alone with his piano. Do you think his attitude toward practice will be different now? As long as he remembers what he's going to become, Kevin's discipline will have a direction, a goal that will pull him into the future. Yes, effort will be involved, but you could hardly call it drudgery.

When it comes to discipline in the Christian life, many believers feel as Kevin did toward piano practice—it's discipline without direction. Prayer threatens to be drudgery. The practical value of meditation on Scripture seems uncertain. The real purpose of these disciplines is often unclear.

First we must understand what we shall become. It is said of God's elect in **Romans 8:29**, "*For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.*" God's eternal plan ensures that every Christian will ultimately conform to Christlikeness. We will be changed "*when he appears so that we shall be like him*" (1 John 3:2). This is no fairy tale vision; *this is you*, Christian, in a few years.

So why all the talk about discipline? If God has predestined our conformity to Christlikeness, where does discipline fit in?

Although God will grant Christlikeness to us when Jesus returns, until then He intends for us to grow toward that Christlikeness. We aren't merely to

wait for holiness, we're to pursue it. *"Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy,"* we're commanded in **Hebrews 12:14**, for *"without holiness no one will see the Lord."*

Which leads us to ask what every Christian should ask, "How then shall we pursue holiness? How can we be like Jesus Christ, the Son of God?"

We find a clear answer in our passage **1 Timothy 4:7**: *"Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness"* NASB.

Jacob wrestles with God

Consider the story of Jacob and his night wrestling with God in Genesis 32.

Genesis 32:7-8 *⁷In great fear and distress Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups, and the flocks and herds and camels as well. ⁸He thought, "If Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape."*

Jacob is returning to the land of his fathers. God has blessed him and been with him, but Jacob fears his brother Esau greatly. He feared he saw more than he feared God in spite of God's blessing on him.

(vv.13-21) To soften his brother up, he began to send gifts to him, herds of camels and cows and goats. He sent one group, then another, then even a third.

Gen. 32:22-29 That night Jacob took all his family and all his possessions and sent them across the river, while he stayed behind (apparently getting out of camp in case there was a surprise attack)

Genesis 32:23-30 *²³After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. ²⁴So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. ²⁵When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. ²⁶Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." ²⁷The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. ²⁸Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome." ²⁹Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.*

³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

This is a strange and unique story on many levels. One of them is that it is not often that God comes to meet with a man in such a physical way. But I believe it shows the readiness of God to be close to us and help us.

The second is that Jacob and Esau had a wrestling match. God led him, even wanted him to struggle and ultimately even be victorious, showing that it is worth the struggle if we can prevail with God. Going deeper with God IS a struggle of sorts. We have to wrestle with our human nature and connecting with a spiritual being. We have to fight our sinfulness and our laziness. But ultimately it is worth it. That's why it's called Spiritual Disciplines.

Result? When we get to chapter 33, Jacob's heart has changed. Here comes Esau with his 400 men. **Genesis 33:2-3** *²He put the maidservants and their children in front, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph in the rear. ³He himself went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother.*

Now, after spending time with God, Jacob has the confidence to go before his family. He still does not know the outcome, but he is willing to trust God and not hide behind his family.

And when Esau receives him with open arms, Jacob almost can't believe the gracious reception. He had received once again, far more than he deserved.

POINT: The struggle is worth it.

THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES — THE MEANS TO GODLINESS

The Spiritual Disciplines are those personal and corporate disciplines that promote spiritual growth. They are the habits of devotion that have been practiced by the people of God since biblical times.

Whatever the Discipline, its most important feature is its purpose. Just as there is little value in practicing the scales on a guitar or piano apart from the purpose of playing music, there is little value in practicing Spiritual Disciplines apart from the single purpose that unites them (Colossians 2:20-23, 1

Timothy 4:8). That purpose is godliness. Thus we are told in 1 Timothy 4:7 to discipline ourselves *"for the purpose of godliness"*

Actually, God uses three primary catalysts for changing us and conforming us to Christlikeness, but only one is largely under our control. One catalyst the Lord uses to change us is **people**. *"As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another"* (Proverbs 27:17).—God changes us through these people.

Another change agent God uses in our lives is **circumstances**. The classic text for this is Romans 8:28: *"We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."* Financial pressures, physical conditions, even the weather are used in the hands of God to stimulate us toward holiness.

Then there is the catalyst of the **Spiritual Disciplines** -- Prayer, Bible Intake, Service, Fasting, Worship etc.

We often have little choice regarding the people and circumstances God brings into our lives, but we can decide, for example, whether we will read the Bible or pray today.

So on the one hand, we recognize that even the most iron-willed self-discipline will not *make* us more holy, for growth in holiness is a gift from God (John 17:17, 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Hebrews 2:11). On the other hand, we can do something to further the process.

Consider for a moment the 5 Spiritual Disciplines I will challenge us to strive for together. There are more of course, but these are a challenge to all of us. By the end of the month my prayer is that you will join me in making a commitment to work on these 5 in 2009.

So, with that introduction said, let's now change course. Grab your sermon note outline sheet and look at it with me. Listen for a moment to the following questions and tell me where you might hear them?

"How are you feeling generally?"

"DURING THE PAST YEAR, HAVE YOU HAD ANY TROUBLE SLEEPING?"

"Have you experienced any breathing difficulties? "Any changes in your eyesight?"

Answers? This is the way it goes during my annual physical checkup. The doctor always evaluates my bodily health by two means—**questions**, like above. And also by **tests**.

"Relax while I test your reflexes.

You're EKG looks good.

"I've looked over the results of your blood test?"

Questions and tests.

In prior centuries, ministers were sometimes referred to as "physicians of the soul." In our day, as in theirs, the timeless process of discerning one's spiritual health, like physical health, involves questions and tests.

So, as we consider spiritual growth, we will begin by doing a little exercise to, by the help of the Holy Spirit, enable you to self-diagnose your spiritual health.

I want to go over Ten Questions meant to Diagnose Your Spiritual Health. My purpose is to act as a "physician of the soul"—to ask questions and suggest spiritual tests that can help. (base response on 1 yr ago)

1. Do you thirst for God?
 ♦.....♦.....♦.....♦.....♦
 Less A Little Less Same A Little More More
2. Are you governed increasingly by God's Word?
3. Are you more loving?
4. Are you more sensitive to God's presence?
5. Do you have a growing concern for the spiritual and temporal needs of others?
6. Do you delight in the bride of Christ?
7. Are the spiritual disciplines increasingly important to you?
8. Do you still grieve over sin?
9. Are you a quick forgiver?
10. Do you yearn for heaven and to be with Jesus?

When you look at your self-diagnosis do you see the necessity to wrestle with God more this year?

The Spiritual Disciplines then are also like channels of God's transforming grace. They do not save us nor are they meant to invoke guilt for not

doing them as someone else says we should (including me). But they are channels of god's grace and love.

The great British Baptist preacher of the nineteenth century, Charles Spurgeon, stressed the importance this way: *"I must take care above all that I cultivate communion with Christ, for though that can never be the basis of my peace—mark that—yet it will be the channel of it."*

And let us not forget that freedom is the reward of discipline.

What is this freedom of Godliness? Think again of our illustration with Kevin and the piano. For instance, an accomplished piano player (like Joan) can play a difficult arrangement while I can not.

Why? Because of her years of disciplined practice.

- Similarly, those who are "free" to make wise decisions in difficult times are those who have wrestled with God.
- Similarly, those who are "free" to quote Scripture are those who have disciplined themselves to read and memorize God's Word.
- Similarly, there is a freedom from self-centeredness for those who developed in the disciplines of worship, service, and evangelism.

The freedom of Godliness is the freedom to do what God calls us to do AND the freedom to express the character qualities of Christ through our own personality. This kind of freedom is the "reward" or result of the blessing of God when we practice the Spiritual Disciplines.

But we must remember that the full-grown freedoms of discipline-nurtured Godliness don't develop overnight or during a weekend seminar.

It takes years to become an excellent musician. It takes time and practice to lower your golf score or to improve their sports performance. People go to school and study and train themselves to be successful in their careers, because they know it takes sacrifice to succeed.

Should we, who pursue the highest goal of them all, to become like Christ, should we give up quickly when they find the Spiritual Disciplines don't come easily, as though becoming like Jesus was not supposed to take much effort?

Today is an invitation to all Christians to enjoy the Spiritual Disciplines. All in whom the Spirit of God dwells are invited to taste the joy of a Spiritual Disciplines lifestyle.

One application - go read your Bible this week.

Once again - Remember Kevin and his guitar? His daily practice would take on an entirely new spirit once he realized where it would take him. The discipline of practice would gradually become the means to one of the greatest enjoyments of his life.

Discipline without direction is drudgery. But the Spiritual Disciplines are never drudgery as long as we practice them with the goal of Godliness in mind.