

## CHAPTER TWO

# TRAIN YOURSELF TO BE GODLY

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Developing a relationship with God involves the same dynamics as any skill we might seek to develop. What does it take to master skydiving? The saxophone? Shuffleboard? The same three things it takes to become intimate with God: discipline, practice, and sacrifice.

Now, try to hold your applause. Is that what you expected? Many Christians, whether they would admit it or not, have some vague sense that intimacy with God will miraculously and effortlessly evolve. (Miraculously? In a sense, yes. But effortlessly? Absolutely not.) They believe in the power of the Holy Spirit and grace—as they should—but fail to see the importance of their own effort...

Discipline...

Practice...

Sacrifice.

If we want to develop a closer relationship with God, we've got some work ahead of us.

### **Practice Precedes Performance**

Once when I was a young boy the NCAA college basketball finals were held nearby at the University of Maryland. Because my friend's father had tickets, I was able to go to the game as well as the practice session the day before. John Wooden, one of the greatest coaches in college basketball history, had again led his UCLA team to the semi-finals. The opportunity to get right down on the court and watch this team practice at this level was the closest thing to heaven I had experienced up to that time.

I was a serious sports fan even then, and these UCLA players who came out of the locker room and began their drills were some of my heroes. But the practice session turned out differently than I had expected. There were no

### WHEN YOU WISH UPON A STAR

Think of certain young people who idolize an outstanding baseball player. They want nothing so much as to pitch or run or hit as well as their idol. So what do they do?...The star is well known for sliding head first into bases, so the teenagers do too. The star holds his bat above his head, so the teenagers do too. These young people try anything and everything their idol does, hoping to be like him—they buy the type shoes the star wears, the same glove he uses, the same bat.

Will they succeed in performing like the star, though? We all know the answer quite well. We know that they won't succeed if all they do is try to be like him in the game... The star performer himself didn't achieve his excellence by trying to behave in a certain way *only during the game*. Instead, he chose an overall life of preparation of mind and body, pouring all his energies into that total preparation, to provide a foundation in the body's automatic responses and strength for his conscious efforts during the game.

Those exquisite responses we see, the amazing timing and strength such an athlete displays, aren't produced and maintained by the short hours of the game itself. They are available to the athlete for those short and all-important hours because of a daily regime nobody sees.<sup>1</sup>

— Dallas Willard

#### Meditate on

#### 1 Corinthians 9:24-27.

For Paul, the prize was well worth the pain. Ask God to fill you with the same passion.

slam dunks or behind-the-back passes. Instead, for two hours Coach Wooden rotated his players through numerous drills up and down the court, timing each drill and then moving on to the next. It wasn't exciting. There was no applause, no roar of a capacity crowd. This was all taking place primarily outside of public view.

Their practice was simple and unimpressive—but it's what prepared UCLA to be so effective as they swept their final two games and won the national championship.

Announcers usually overlook details like that. Instead of describing all the sweat and practice that went into a brilliant performance, they tend to focus on the talent and ability of individual players. Now there's no doubt today's star athletes are gifted. I could spend the rest of my life in training and at no point would I be able to do an effective job of covering Michael Jordan. But if you talked to Jordan or Coach Wooden's UCLA team, they would tell you their public display of astonishing basketball was made

possible by the practice which took place in private.

Because such truths so often go ignored and unappreciated in our culture, we can fail to see that skill is of little value without practice and sacrifice. Apart from a private life of sacrifice, discipline, and daily practice—no matter how monotonous—even the most gifted individual will never reach peak performance.

World-class performers are those who count the cost and press on. They don't pity themselves for having to

**1** Which of the following training techniques would best help you reach peak potential as a Christian?

- Spend the next 40 years in a monastery or convent
- Watch three hours of religious programming daily while riding an exercise bike
- Devote one entire month to saturating your spirit with teaching tapes, books, and videos
- Pray and meditate on God's Word for 30 minutes each day

sacrifice time with friends, restrict their diets, or miss the latest cultural attraction. They understand what's required. They understand their need for a demanding daily regimen of practice in order to maintain their edge of excellence and achieve their goal.

If we're serious about deepening our relationship with God and growing in godliness, we will study the private disciplines that helped make Christ effective in public. He is the perfect example. If we can discern and practice those disciplines, we'll see *results*.

## Working Out in the Wilderness

In the fourth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, beginning in verse one, we find our Lord showing the kind of spiritual strength we'd like to have. Three times Satan tempts him. Three times Jesus turns him away. It's a brilliant performance, a total domination.

Yet our Lord's success was the result of serious preparation: "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry" (Mt 4:1-2). These two sentences are very short. It's easy to read them quickly, completely missing the fact that they reveal the source of Jesus' strength. Let's examine them and see what we can learn.

**2** Check the one spiritual discipline you find most difficult:

- Bible study
- Private prayer
- Group prayer
- Worship
- Fasting
- Solitude/Rest
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

First, Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit. Having learned to wait on the Father for insight and direction, he was very familiar with the Spirit's prompting when it came. That is why, even though the wilderness was not a desirable place to go, when the Spirit directed Jesus there, that's where he went.

He also prepared for his upcoming confrontation by fasting forty days and forty nights. No Big Macs, no Doritos—not even locusts and wild honey. We're talking spiritual discipline.

And unlike today's hunger-strikers, he didn't have the national media to cheer him on. He was alone—hungry and alone—for forty days and nights. Discipline...

**For Further Study:**

Some good examples of Jesus' private prayer life can be found in Matthew 14:23 and 26:36-44; in Mark 1:35 and 6:46; and in Luke 5:15-16, 6:12-13, and 9:28.

Practice...Sacrifice.

It seems to me Matthew may have been engaging in understatement there in verse 2: "...after which he was hungry." You better believe he was! Not to mention weak. Why would Jesus put himself in such a vulnerable condition before this head-to-head confrontation with Satan? Because he knew that while fasting would weaken his body, it would make him strong in spirit.

I think Jesus spent much of those forty days meditating on Scripture. Each time Satan tempted him, he responded with a quote from the book of Deuteronomy. It's my guess that Jesus, reading through his Old-Testament-In-A-Year plan, had wound up in this often-neglected book. Because he was meditating on these passages, he was able to utilize three appropriate verses, wielding them as the sword of the Spirit.

**3** Find one verse you could use to battle a recurring temptation. Write it in the space below.

Can we understand and appreciate the effort involved here? Do we understand the relationship between Christ's private preparation and his public performance?

Although Jesus overcame Satan's attack in the wilderness through preparation in private, a very different temptation awaited him when he began to minister publicly. Luke records our Lord's response to the pressure of popularity: "Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (Lk 5:15-16). It would

have been so easy for him to be manipulated by the limitless number of legitimate needs. Instead, he sought his Father in private. It didn't take the disciples long to see that he was intimate with and dependent on his Father; morning by morning he went to a solitary place where he could listen, meditate, and worship. These disciplines weren't an obligation for him—they were his passion. And they were the means by which he received grace to fulfill his ministry and eventually die on the cross.

These passages are only two examples. Unlike today's sports announcers, the Gospel writers recognized the source of Christ's strength and repeatedly documented his practice of the disciplines. Yet we rarely highlight these verses in our Bibles. They are easily overlooked. We

**Meditate on Isaiah 50:4-7.** Note how verses 4-5 in this prophetic description of Jesus prepare him for the suffering described in verses 6-7.

**Meditate on John 5:19-20.** If Jesus approached his daily “To Do” list this way, do you think you would benefit from the same kind of guidance?

need to identify and study them as a description of our Lord’s daily lifestyle. If we want to emulate Christ’s on-the-field performance, we must imitate his off-the-field preparation.

## Partners in the Process of Change

Let’s now look at two verses which, at face value, seem to give conflicting clues as to the source of our power to live like Christ.

“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2Co 3:17-18). Freedom, as Paul uses it here, implies a freedom from selfishness, freedom from self-gratification, freedom to serve God, freedom to serve others. Also note the word “transformed”—we’ll see that stressed again shortly.

“ Though the power for godly character comes from Christ, the responsibility for developing and displaying that character is ours. This principle seems to be one of the most difficult for us to understand and apply. One day we sense our personal responsibility and seek to live a godly life by the strength of our own willpower. The next day, realizing the futility of trusting in ourselves, we turn it all over to Christ and abdicate our responsibility which is set forth in the Scriptures. We need to learn that the Bible teaches both total responsibility and total dependence in all aspects of the Christian life.<sup>2</sup>

— Jerry Bridges

This passage emphasizes the necessity of the Holy Spirit in the transforming process. An inner work is needed. It begins with our regeneration—an exclusive work of God—and continues as the Holy Spirit conforms us to the image of Christ.

While only the Spirit can bring about change, God has also given us a vital role in this continuing process of transformation. Paul identifies our responsibility in Romans 12:2: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will

be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

*How* are we transformed? By the renewing of our minds. This verse is a clear command. If the Spirit is going to transform us, we must first put ourselves in a position to be transformed by devoting ourselves to the spiritual disciplines, for it is by these that our minds are renewed.

**For Further Study:**

Read Isaiah 64:6 and 1 Peter 1:15-16. In light of the first passage, how can we hope to obey the second?

At this point, it would be easy to become confused or misled if we do not keep clearly in mind the distinctions between justification and sanctification, and the role we play in each. Justification occurs—all at once—when we are converted. It is completely and exclusively an act of God. We make no contribution to our justification whatsoever except, as Luther said, our sin which God so graciously forgives. No amount of Bible study, prayer, or fasting can ever become the basis for our justification before God, for we have been declared righteous by God solely on the basis of the person and finished work of Jesus Christ.

- 4** Check all that apply: You know you're legalistic when you...
- Stay depressed all day because you slept through your quiet time
  - Need assurance that you are "doing enough" spiritually to remain in God's favor
  - Gauge the depth of your spirituality by the length of your quiet time
  - Look down on other Christians who have never read through the Bible
  - Feel closer to God because you've gotten up early to pray three days in a row
  - Attribute God's blessing to your own spiritual diligence

Once we become Christians, however, the gradual process of sanctification (becoming more like Christ) and the renewing of our minds begins. In this, God is still the central player—the now-indwelling Holy Spirit continually gives us the grace to obey, without which we would live in constant rebellion against God—yet our degree of obedience to God's commands makes a genuine difference, both in this life and for eternity.

So, first we are justified through Christ alone. Then, the *purpose* and *evidence* of our justification is a life of obedience and spiritual growth (sanctification). That's what it means to be a disciple, a disciplined one. Conversion is only the beginning. Our call is to follow Jesus and to reflect his character.

**Don't Let Go!**

"Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly" (1Ti 4:7). The last five words of this verse contain three essential insights for us as we explore the spiritual disciplines.

First, note the goal. It's not happiness. It's not success. The goal is godliness. Now that doesn't sell many Christian books, and it certainly doesn't fly on most Christian television, but the Church of Jesus Christ should be characterized by people whose primary motivation is godliness. Rather than making every decision in pursuit of personal prosperity and career advancement,

they live for God's glory, placing godliness and servanthood above material gain.

Second, consider the word "train." Paul used the Greek word *gymnazo* from which we get our word "gymnasium." He chose this term intentionally. The dedicated athlete and the dedicated Christian both submit to intensive training and self-discipline. They spend long hours in private honing their skills, reflexes, and concentration. But where the athlete seeks honor, the Christian seeks intimacy.

“ Jesus did not possess any special means of spiritual growth which are not available to us. It is essential to realize this if we are to understand Jesus, if we are to become like him.<sup>3</sup>

— Sinclair Ferguson

Third, this verse—like Romans 12:2—places the responsibility for training squarely in our court. Don't ask God to train you. He won't do it. Believe me, I've asked many times. Instead, he'll point you to your spiritual gymnasium with the

same advice Paul gave young Timothy: *Train yourself!*

The once-popular, pseudo-spiritual advice to "Let go and let God" may be offered with good intentions, but it's completely unbiblical. A cooperative effort is required. Though God is the one who began and sustains this good work in us (Php 1:6), he commands our participation in the process of sanctification.

I try to work out at the YMCA three times a week. In the years during which I've kept that schedule, I can't remember ever desiring to go. My body has never communicated, "Hey, let's get there early today! And do a double routine!" Just the opposite. "Don't become a fanatic," it argues. "You worked out two days ago. We need another rest. How about tomorrow? How about if we only go twice this week?" Only because I've determined ahead of time that the benefits are worth the pain do I end up going.

I'd like to say that my body stops complaining once the decision has been made. But the argument resumes at

almost every exercise machine. "Don't do this one today. What if your back gives out? Don't run on the stairmaster as well. All right, if you're going to do it, fine. Just do it at half speed." The only exhilaration I feel at the end of a workout is that it's over and I can go home.

And by the way—whoever

**Meditate on 1 Peter 1:15-16.** Are there any areas of your life where you have concluded that holiness (or godliness) is beyond your reach?

“ The general human failing is to want what is right and important, but at the same time not to commit to the kind of life that will produce the action we know to be right and the condition we want to enjoy.<sup>4</sup>

— Dallas Willard

**For Further Study:**

In Psalm 22, David's emotions swing dramatically. What if he had given up after verse 2?

comes up with those dumb health-spa commercials has never been to the YMCA where I work out. You won't find a group of joyful, perfectly proportioned people effortlessly lifting weights and enjoying meaningful conversation. Nor is it a fitness fashion show. We're just a bunch of awkwardly dressed individuals working up a sweat.

There's a point to my confession here: this scenario closely parallels my experience with spiritual exercise. Can you relate? I wish something dramatic would take place daily to motivate me for my devotional time...a supernatural wake-up call, perhaps, or an angelic escort down to my study. Yet that hasn't been the case. So I've learned not to evaluate the quality of my devotions by the level of my emotions. Regardless of my enthusiasm before or during my devotional time, the combination of worship, prayer, and Bible study is serving to transform me. No question.

Often our spiritual progress is evident to everyone but ourselves. That is part of the reason God places us in a local church. Where we may have overlooked or underestimated our progress, others can bring encouragement by pointing out the fruit born of our diligent practice of the spiritual disciplines.

### **One Choice at a Time**

By now, the especially zealous reader may be all pumped up at the idea of starting tomorrow with a rigorous spiritual workout. That's great—just make sure your first “exercise” is a careful review of the foundation upon which this new determination is built. Does that foundation consist of a fresh understanding of biblical truth, or merely the temporary energy of emotion? If you hope to persevere in your practice of the spiritual disciplines, you'll need something far more reliable than enthusiasm.

Others of you are reading this with a deepening sense of despair. You say, “You don't know how often I have tried.” But I've been in the same place. I am among those countless Christians who at least once have started a new year by saying, “This is it! I will read through the Bible in a year!” By February we're bogged down in Leviticus and falling at least four chapters behind every day. In March, provoked by overwhelming guilt, we try to catch up by reading sixty-eight chapters at a sitting—a truly dynamic experience.

I understand that such failures can tempt us to dis-

**Meditate on Hebrews 3:12-19.** What was the consequence of Israel's unbelief?

**5** When we share our needs with others, we receive both encouragement and accountability. What specific spiritual goals could you share with a trusted friend?

couragement, but I've learned not to submit to it, because discouragement is rooted in pride, self-sufficiency, and unbelief. God's Word says, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Php 4:13). Do you feel hopelessly weak when it comes to the spiritual disciplines? Excellent! You're a perfect candidate for the grace of God, for his promise is explicit: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2Co 12:9).

Did you know you are in training at this very moment? Training takes place one choice at a time. Whenever

you sin, you are training yourself in ungodliness. (Unfortunately, most of us have become extremely proficient in that area.) But every time we obey God and resist sin, we train ourselves in godliness. You are training yourself to be godly simply by studying and applying what you find in this book.

If you are frustrated and discouraged with your practice of the spiritual disciplines, here's a word of advice: Don't try to be disciplined for the rest of the year today. Don't try to be disciplined for the rest of your *life* today. Just focus on the next 24 hours.

If you need to cut back on calories, it's not smart to begin by proclaiming, "I will not eat dessert for the rest of my life. Until I die or Jesus returns, I will never, ever eat dessert again!" With that approach, you're setting yourself up for disappointment. Instead, simply focus on skipping dessert today.

Otherwise, your resolve will begin to crumble as soon as the waitress brings the dessert tray around at the restaurant tonight. And once you've made eye contact with that piece of Double Dipped Chocolate Fudge Fantasy, it's all over. "Perhaps I was a bit emotional in my quiet time this morning," you'll think. "I really want to guard against legalism. Isn't there a verse about God 'giving us all things richly to enjoy'? What could be richer than this?" Before you know it, that incredible dessert will be reduced to a few crumbs and a six-ounce bulge beneath your belt.

So how do you begin to train yourself in obedience in this area? *You don't eat that piece of cake.* Isn't that dramatic? Isn't that profound? The same amazing approach

**For Further Study:  
Read Hebrews 12:1-**

**11.** What encouragement do you gain from Jesus' example? Have you resisted sin as violently as verse 4 suggests? What harvest does discipline yield (verse 11)?

will work for developing the spiritual disciplines. Rather than trying to read through the Bible in a year, begin studying the Gospel of John today. Instead of scheduling 12 hours of prayer for tomorrow, begin the day with 15 minutes. Start small, depend on the Holy Spirit, and practice the spiritual disciplines...one decision at a time.

If you want to grow in intimacy with God, if you want to become more like Jesus, here's the secret: Develop the overall lifestyle we see modeled by our Lord. But don't be deceived. It's going to take time and effort to change your lifestyle and habits. God is aware of that. *We* are the ones who need the patience to persevere.

“ One word summarizes the mark of the spiritually mature man or woman— obedience.<sup>5</sup>

— Jerry White

And finally, remember that God is eager to give you a fresh discovery of himself. But he doesn't give those discoveries to the casual inquirer. He gives them to the individual who seeks

with all his heart. When God finds someone who will pursue him with perseverance, it is his delight to reveal himself. That's the ultimate reward for our grace-motivated discipline. That is the prize we seek as we train ourselves to be godly—an intimate, personal relationship with the God who redeemed us and before whom we'll stand throughout eternity, worshiping in amazement as he reveals himself to us in ever-increasing fullness without end. ■

**GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. Suppose you're an aspiring author...could you expect to get rich from a first book titled *The Painful Path to Godliness*? What does that say about our culture?
2. Summarize the "secret" of Christ's success. (Pages 11-12)
3. Read Philippians 2:12-13. How can we simultaneously "work out our salvation" *and* let God work in us according to his purpose?
4. What does it mean to be a disciple? (See page 14)
5. Does a lack of emotion indicate that your spiritual disciplines need improvement? Why or why not?

6. The author writes that “No amount of Bible study, prayer, or fasting ever becomes the basis for our justification before God” (Page 14). What then is the purpose of these disciplines?

7. What would it take for you to establish a regular pattern of spiritual exercise?

**RECOMMENDED  
READING**

*The Pursuit of Holiness* by Jerry Bridges (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1978)

*The Practice of Godliness* by Jerry Bridges (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1983)

*Holiness* by J.C. Ryle (Hertfordshire, England: Evangelical Press, 1979. Originally published in 1879.)

*The Discipline of Grace* by Jerry Bridges (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1994)

**NOTES**

1. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), pp.3-4.
2. Jerry Bridges, *The Practice of Godliness* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1983), p.75-76.
3. Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Grow in Grace* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), p.20.
4. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, p.6.
5. Jerry White, *The Power of Commitment* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1985), p.131.