

## **Walking With God – Spiritual Habits for Ordinary People**

Alright, it's accountability time. It is January 6. How many of you have New Year's resolutions or you've simply made a personal commitment of some sort relating to changes in your diet, exercise, or some lifestyle change. You are starting new habits to hopefully make a new you, or at least an improved you.

I hope you stick with it. I hope it produces the results you're looking for.

This is a time of year when a lot of people set new goals, and make personal commitments to help reach those goals. Gym memberships skyrocket. Enrollment in Weight Watchers swells. People buy new workout gear. They got Fitbits for Christmas. They install apps on their phones to help them watch what they eat. These new habits and new routines are all an effort to change the course of their lives.

All of these things have to do with something called discipline. Here's a definition I found in the book, *The Dude's Guide to Manhood*, "Any activity I can do by direct effort that will help me do what I cannot now do by direct effort." So, I can't do it now. I'm not there yet, but if I engage in these habits; if I do these exercises; I do these practices, then I will be able to do it later. I will achieve my goal one step at a time. That's discipline.

Discipline can help you succeed in any area of life. In fact, it's usually necessary if you want to do well with anything. Any successful athlete knows this. Anyone who highly accomplished in their field knows this. Any artist or composer knows this. Even Joey Chestnut, 11-time winner of the Nathan's hot dog eating contest follows a strict training regimen that requires discipline and focus. NFL quarterbacks didn't start out at that level. Master carpenters started out as apprentices. Musicians don't begin as prodigies performing at Carnegie Hall. You don't graduate from law school and then immediately charge \$300 an hour. Years of discipline, practice, and training get you there.

Has anyone competed in a marathon, half marathon, an endurance swimmer, a triathlon, 5 k or 10 k?

Personal story training for MS150.

### **What Are Spiritual Disciplines**

We are starting a new series called *Walking with God*. In this series we are going to explore spiritual habits for ordinary people. These are habits of the heart that will grow your faith, that will grow your vision, and grow you closer to your Lord and Savior. These habits are what are often called spiritual disciplines.

Now, that's not a biblical term. You can't look up "spiritual disciplines" in a Bible concordance. But it is a biblical idea.

Listen to what Paul writes to a young minister named Timothy that he was mentoring: *"Train 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. This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance (1 Timothy 4:7b-9)."*

The word translated “*train*” here is the Greek word *Gymnazo*. Does that look familiar? That’s the basis for our word for gym, gymnastics, and gymnasium. It refers to athletic training, to physical exercise, and when applied to other things it meant to discipline one’s self. So these verses are saying that physical disciplines can be helpful. They have some use for some things, but spiritual discipline; spiritual exercise is useful for everything, both for our lives right now, and for eternity.

And in case you’re thinking, “He was writing to a young minister. Of course, he would need to do those sorts of things, but he’s not writing to an ordinary person like me.” Listen to what Paul writes to a group of Christians living in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century city of Corinth, a bunch of ordinary people trying to follow Jesus:

*Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.-1 Cor. 9:24-27*

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Spiritual disciplines are Biblical habits that help us grow in our walk with God. Go back to our definition of discipline in general, “Any activity I can do by direct effort that will help me do what I cannot now do by direct effort.” Now simply apply that to our spiritual lives. Spiritual practices that we CAN do now by direct effort that will help us eventually be able to spiritually be what we cannot be now. It is to arrange your outer life so that you can grow your inner life.

Brett and Kate McKay define the disciplines this way on *The Art of Manliness* blog,

“Spiritual disciplines are habits, practices, and experiences that are designed to develop, grow, and strengthen certain qualities of spirit — to build the “muscles” of one’s character and expand the breadth of one’s inner life.”

Spiritual disciplines are the workouts that train the soul.

What are the disciplines? There’s not a cut and dried list. They vary from one list to another, but down through the centuries there are certain habits that have been recognized by the Christian community in general as being spiritual disciplines.

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For our study, we are going to stick with Biblical habits that were exemplified and taught by Jesus and the inspired Biblical writers. These include personal disciplines such as Bible study, prayer, fasting and solitude. These include outward disciplines such as serving, stewardship, and perseverance, and they also include community disciplines such as worship, celebration, confession, and evangelism.

This means we will not spend time looking at man-made practices that come from outside Scripture. They may be very valuable and helpful, but I don’t believe anyone should be made to feel like they have to do them. For example, I’m a big believer in journaling, and it’s played an important role in my own

spiritual growth, but I can't point to a book, chapter, and verse in the Bible and say, "You need to be doing this."

We also are not going to look at practices that come from other traditions or other faiths. Feng Shui is not a spiritual discipline. When we talk about meditation, we aren't talking about the same thing as in eastern mysticism. There may be some practices out there you find helpful, but when we start bringing those in as spiritual disciplines we run the risk of exposing ourselves to error and dabbling in things we as Christians don't need to be dabbling in. Spiritual disciplines are to bring you closer to God, not lead you astray.

### **What Spiritual Discipline is Not**

While we're talking about what spiritual disciplines are, it can also be helpful to talk about what they are not. First of all, spiritual disciplines have nothing to do with our position in Christ. If you are a Christian, you are covered in the blood of Christ, your sins are forgiven and your eternity is assured by the grace of God. 2 Corinthians 5:17-18 says, *"if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself."* Your salvation is from God, not because you fasted enough or got up at 4 am every morning to pray and study your Bible.

Secondly, spiritual disciplines have nothing to do with God's favor. God doesn't like you better or love you more because you fast more than the next person. God's love for you isn't conditional on your performance. Romans 5:8 assures us, *"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."* God's not going to love you more because you do these things. He's not going to love you any less if you don't. He already loves you immeasurably. Now, you might love Him more. You might have a better understanding of His love. You might have a deeper experience of His love, but you will not change His love for you.

Thirdly, spiritual disciplines are not a shortcut. These are not the spiritual equivalent of some muscle building powder from GNC or a diet pill that takes off the pounds and gives you a summer ready swimsuit body in six weeks. These are not quick and easy techniques. Spiritual disciplines require . . . you guessed it- discipline. They require work. They require effort. That means they can be difficult. Training for anything can be hard. But I must also say they will bring you moments that are intensely joyful.

Fourthly, spiritual disciplines aren't just for the spiritual elite. A lot of people have this mistaken notion that spiritual disciplines are just for monks living in the desert. Or maybe they're just for Bible college professors and preachers. Or maybe they're only for hardcore Christians, or those who've been following Christ for a really long time, or for retired believers who have time for that sort of thing.

The thing about spiritual disciplines is that anyone can do them. They're open to everyone, young or old, brand new believer or lifelong follower of Christ. It doesn't matter how much money you have. It doesn't matter your IQ test, or if you can pass one of those irresistible Facebook quizzes with flying colors. Anyone can pray. Anyone can meditate on God's word. Anyone can fast. Anyone can worship. Anyone can spend time alone with God. Anyone can serve. Anyone can give. Anyone can confess.

The bottom line is this: the spiritual disciplines are for you. You can do this.

### **Why Spiritual Disciplines Matter**

So, we've talked about what the disciplines are, as well as what they are not. The last question I want to answer this morning is this. Why? Why do this? Why is this important?

### **It Bring you Godliness**

Reason number one: spiritual disciplines bring you godliness. Go back to our scripture in 1 Timothy. *"Train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things."* We are training to be godly. We are exercising for godliness.

Godliness here means to live your life with a respect or reverence for God. It is to live with the recognition of God's presence. Now, God is always there. God is always present. He is always actively present in your life.

But we don't always know it. We don't recognize it. We either don't know how to recognize it, or we are so easily distracted we forget to see it. God was present in the drive-thru lane on Monday. He was present while you Facebooked on Tuesday. He was present in the doctor's office on Wednesday. He was present in the school pickup lane on Thursday. He was present while you watched TV on Friday. He was present when you were at Wal-Mart yesterday. But we're not always with Him.

The spiritual disciplines help us do that. They help us walk with God through everyday life. They help us find those God moments in the ordinary. They help us experience His presence in the mundane.

The reason we find godliness so hard is because we haven't trained for it. It doesn't come to us by nature. The only way hard things become easy is through practice. We spend much of our Christian lives trying to be like Jesus. We try to be more patient. We try to be more loving. We try to be more encouraging.

Just trying is not enough. If we only try, we will fail. We must train. It's like trying to run a marathon without training. No matter how hard you try, you will fail, and you will be miserable in the trying. It takes training. There's a big difference between trying to do something, and training to do something.

I could try to adjust your back like Pat Theobald. I could try to make a beautiful quilt like Judy Wilson. You know what would happen. I would mess your back up even worse, and I'd make a hideous tangle of rags, because I haven't trained to do those things.

Godliness comes by training. You can try to be more patient, or you can train to be more patient. You can try to be more loving, or you can train to be more loving. See the difference? Check out this verse. It's talking about Reading and understanding Scripture here. *"Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, **who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.**"*

The spiritual disciplines are about training for godliness.

## **It Brings God Glory**

The second reason why spiritual disciplines are important for your life is this: It brings God glory. Spiritual disciplines bring us godliness. They bring him glory. The Apostle Peter's closing words in 2 Peter are these, "*Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen* (2 Pet. 3:18)." Peter didn't just say this because it sounded like a good way to end a letter. He was making a point. When we grow in our godliness, it brings him glory. And just like training in godliness is good for us both now and in eternity, growing in godliness brings him glory both now and in eternity.

To bring him glory means to lift him up, to give him honor, to make his name, his greatness, and his presence known. As you train for godliness your life becomes a pedestal, a mantle on which God's glory and the glory of His Son, Jesus are put on display.

Let me put it this way: As you train for godliness the more of Jesus you will see, and the more of Jesus everyone else will see as well. Isn't that what we want? To see more of Jesus and to experience more of his presence in our lives, and for everyone else to see Him too?

We often ask the question, "What are you living for?" Perhaps the better question is "What life are you training for?" Not what life are you wishing for, hoping for, dreaming about, but what life are you training for. That which you regularly do and practice, that's the life you're living for.

I'm not asking you to change your New Year's Resolutions, but I do want to invite you to train for something that matters eternally. I want to invite you in 2019 to be really real with your God

I want to invite you to embrace the battle between your best and worst self. I want to invite you to a life of moral and spiritual adventure. I want to invite to move beyond merely trying to do better, and training to be the person God has called you to be.