



## Pursuing Holiness: The Place of Discipline

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In the last sermon on holiness I talked about the need to put sin to death – to establish convictions about a holy life and to make commitments to live them out. We do that, and yet we still fail. We miss the goal. How often have you committed to stop a sinful habit in your life and then find yourself falling into that same sin the next day – or maybe even the next hour? We really do desire holiness, but we don't seem to make any progress toward it.

Well, that's the point of these sermons and tonight I want to talk about another aspect of pursuing holiness. Jay Adams, one of my favourite authors on living the Christian life says this, "You may have sought and tried to obtain *instant* godliness. There is no such thing... We want somebody to give us three easy steps to godliness, and we'll take them next Friday and be godly. The trouble is, godliness doesn't come that way."

The rest of that particular book goes on to explain that only way we can achieve any measure of godliness (or holiness) is through Christian discipline. The book's title is *Godliness through Discipline*. I suggested this book to someone once and they balked at the title. Discipline?! It's almost a bad word in our society and even in the Church. This person thought that discipline was contrary to our freedom in Christ – that it was legalistic.

And yet St. Paul is very clear that we are called to train or discipline ourselves to be godly. He wrote to Timothy: "Train yourself for godliness" (1 Timothy 4:7). In 1 Corinthians 9:25 he makes an analogy with an athlete and the physical training that trains them to perform well and in that same passage he tells us that this sort of athletic training-like discipline is an attitude of life that every Christian should have. If an athlete disciplines himself to win an earthly prize, he tells us, how much more should we Christians discipline ourselves to win a crown that lasts forever.

*Webster's* describes discipline as "training that corrects, moulds, or perfects the mental faculties or moral character." That's exactly what we need to do as we pursue holiness: we need to correct, mould, and train our moral character.

Of course we start our discipline toward holiness with God's Word. St. Paul said, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). Notice the last thing he mentions is *training* – the same thing as *discipline*. This is what Scripture will do for you if you put it to use! In his book Jay Adams says, "It is by willing, prayerful and persistent obedience to the requirements of the Scriptures that godly patterns are developed and come to be a part of us."

St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians: You were taught "to put off your old self...to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22-24). But where are we taught those things? Only in Scripture. Discipline toward holiness starts with Scripture – with a disciplined plan for regular intake of God's Word and a disciplined plan for apply what he says to our daily lives.

Remember that I said before that the pursuit of holiness is in cooperation with the Holy Spirit. He has his part – in fact he makes it possible – but we have our part too. The Spirit is the ultimate author of Scripture – he provides us with the Word – but we have to read, study, and learn it. He's the one who enlightens our minds to understand it, but we still have to commit to applying what he teaches. The most basic problem we have is that you can't apply what you don't know!

*Every* Christian needs to discipline his or her life for a regular healthy diet of the Word. We each need a planned time every day for reading and studying the Bible. If you see someone who is progressing in holiness, I guarantee you that that person has disciplined himself to spend time in the Word each day. There's not other way. You have to know the Word if it's going to make a difference for you.

Now this is the critical point where Satan puts up a fight. He'll do everything he can to stop us. He'll give us all sorts of

excuses or distractions: I'm too sleepy in the morning. I'm too busy during the day. I'm too tired at night. And if we let Satan do his work, we'll never find a good time for God's Word. This is where discipline comes into play. If there's no time for it, you *have* to make time for it. If you schedule it, it's easier to make it happen on a daily basis.

I spend at least an hour, usually more and often two, each morning praying through Morning Prayer and reading Scripture. But I didn't always do that. For a lot of years I squeezed in a short time of prayer and devotion before running off to work. It was better than nothing, but it was pretty shallow. When my work schedule changed and I had to leave for work at six, it suddenly meant getting up at five and there was no time to squeeze in even that shallow time with God. It dropped out entirely for a good six months. And during that time I felt like I was spiritually shrivelling up. I'd say I'd do it before bed, but that almost never worked out. In fact, in my entire life, I've only met a couple of people who could stay faithful to prayer and Bible reading time before bed. For most of us it needs to be in the morning so that everything else doesn't squeeze it out. Eventually I bit the bullet and decided that I was going to have to start getting up at four to get it done. It wasn't easy at first. It meant going to bed a lot earlier than I liked. It meant missing some TV shows I liked to watch. And yet in that discipline I found great blessing.

For some people it may work better to wait until they've got ready for the day. For a busy mom it might mean waiting until husband and kids are out the door, but the bottom line is that every one of us *must* make time for God's Word and then keep to it.

But it's not just that disciplined intake of God's Word requires a planned *time*; it also requires a planned *method*. We're prone to thinking about taking in God's Word by hearing – like you're doing right now as I preach – or reading it ourselves. We can go deeper and talk about taking it in through study – going deeper than just reading. Maybe reading some notes in our Bible to help us understand better or even reading a commentary. We can talk about the need to memorise the Word too. We need to do all those things in order to store it in our hearts and minds so that we can apply it. Memorisation is especially important for application. We especially

need to memorise passages that deal with the sins we struggle with, so that those passages are there and waiting for application when temptation comes.

But we need to do more than hear, read, study, and memorise. We need to meditate on Scripture too. When Joshua became the leader of the Israelites, God said to him, “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it” (Joshua 1:8). To meditate on Scripture is to think about it – turning a passage over in our minds, allowing the Spirit to give us a full understanding of it, and then applying it to our life. If we do it at all, we don’t do it enough.

Again, just like reading and studying (or even coming to Church to listen) means we have to discipline ourselves; meditation requires discipline. Most of us think we don’t have time for this, but think about the fact that God told Joshua to meditate on his Word – and Joshua was just then becoming the commander of the Israelites. I think he was busier with that job than any of us are with ours!

I know people who meditate on Scripture as they drive or while they’re showering or doing other thing in life that give them time to think. How much time do you spend day-dreaming or thinking about things that aren’t all that important. Discipline yourself to use that time more productively, meditating on God’s Word. Even take time as you read and study to sit quietly and meditate on what God had just said to you in the Bible. If you’ve been memorising Scripture it makes it easy to meditate on those passages anywhere – and at the same time lets you review what you’ve memorised.

The goal of meditation is application – to make yourself obedient to what God has said in his Word. That’s the second half of discipline – and it might be the most difficult, because obeying God usually means changing how we live. Remember that I’ve said that as fallen people, we’ve made sin a habit. As the Word shows us our sins, it means breaking long-established habits – and that’s often a hard thing to do. I used to swim competitively. When I was taking swim lessons I developed a quirk in my kick when swimming the breast-stroke. At the time

nobody corrected me, but it became habit. On the swim-team in high school my coach noticed it, showed me how to kick the right way, and then spent the rest of my first year shouting at me from the pool deck every time he saw me falling into that long-established, but bad habit. It had become so natural that I had a terrible time breaking the bad habit and getting in the habit of kicking the right way.

Our patterns of disobedience with God are similar. But discipline for holiness doesn’t mean gritting your teeth and saying, “I’m not going to do that anymore.” Discipline means structured, planned training. Just as you need a plan for regular Bible study, you also need a plan for apply God’s Word to you life.

You know, having my coach yell at me only fixed my bad breast-stroke kick momentarily. What eventually broke the habit and established a new one was a structured and planned programme. Our assistant coach saw the problem and gave me some specific exercises to do that put my attention on the problem and the solution all at once – and it didn’t take long to break the bad habit once I had the plan.

As you read, study, and meditate on Scripture, as yourself these three questions:

1. What does the passage teach me about God’s will for a holy life?
2. How does my life measure up to that Scripture; specifically where and how do I fall short? (Be specific; don’t generalise.)
3. What definite steps of action do I need to take to obey?

The most important part of the process is the specific application of Scripture to specific life situations. You see, we tend to be vague when it comes to sin, because commitment to specific actions makes us uncomfortable. We need to stop making general commitments to obedience and instead aim for specific obedience in specific instances. *We deceive our souls when we grow in knowledge of the truth without specifically responding to it* (James 1:22). *When we do that, it almost always leads to spiritual pride* (1 Corinthians 8:1).

Not long after I was ordained I was spending some time studying the Sermon

on the Mount. On one particular day I was meditating on what it meant to be salt and light – specifically to the non-Christians I worked with. I was thinking about how God called the Israelites to be a light to the Gentile nations and how he gave them the Law – a long set of rules that laid out for them what was holy and godly and what was sinful. And that’s when the Spirit convicted me. I needed to be a witness to my coworkers by not stealing. You see, I pirated everything. When I was a teen I didn’t really even think about it. My friends and I would pirate computer software all the time. When I worked for a computer store it was even easier. I’ll tell you, it’s a rare person who works for a computer store who buys software when it’s so easy just to make copies. Then came the internet and we could download pirated software too – and then we could download pirated music and movies. If I rented a DVD and liked it, I’d just make a copy. It’s not that I didn’t know it was wrong, but it had become a habit. But that day as I was meditating on Jesus’ words and applying it to my life, I realised that I needed to break that habit. It had to be a commitment. I figured I’d better do it while the Spirit was really working on me. I pulled out my laptop there at work and started tossing stuff. After twenty minutes that 80GB hard disk that I had so desperately needed to store everything only had 20GB of data on it. When I got home that day I filled a big garbage bag with CD’s and DVD’s that I had pirated.

But the really hard part came the next day as a CD or a software application came across my workbench. Then it took *discipline*. “You know,” I thought, “I’d like to listen to that music all the time.” Or, “That application would be really useful on my computer or that game would be really fun to play.” That’s when God’s Word, memorised and stored in my heart and mind and already specifically applied to the whole issue of stealing software and music and movies, took over and helped me keep my commitment to obedience.

Do we fail at it? Yes. Any kind of training starts with failure. I didn’t get my breast-stroke kick fixed on the first – or even the second or twentieth – try. We fail more often than we succeed. But if we persevere, we gradually see progress until we start to see ourselves succeeding

more than failing. This is what happens when we seek to put to death particular sins. It's easy to be discouraged or to give up when at first we so often fail. We wonder what's the use. But that's exactly what Satan wants us to feel.

The answer is *perseverance*. We want instant success, but holiness doesn't come instantly. Sinful habits aren't usually broken overnight. Follow-through is required to make any change in our lives and that follow through requires perseverance.

In the last sermon I talked about Jonathan Edwards resolving never to do anything he'd be afraid to do if it were the last hour of his life. But also made this resolution: "Resolved, never to give over, not in the least to slacken, my fight with my corruption, however unsuccessful I may be." If Edwards resolved never to do anything he shouldn't do, why would he also resolve never to give up fighting regardless of how *unsuccessful* he might be? It's not that he didn't really mean it when he made the first resolution. The issue is that he knew that we would still fail sometime in spite of his resolution. He knew that perseverance was required. So he first resolved to seek to live a holy life, then to persevere despite the failures he knew would come.

Solomon wrote in Proverbs 24:16: "For a righteous man falls seven times, and rises again" (NASB). You see, the person who is disciplining himself toward holiness falls, sometimes a lot, but he doesn't quit. Each time he fails he gets back up and gets back to the battle. The unrighteous, however, falls into sin and just gives up. He has no power to overcome because he doesn't have God's Spirit at work in him.

Think of Romans 7 where St. Paul describes his own struggle with sin. I know a lot of people have a hard time with that passage, because we don't like the idea that we have to struggle. We want – even expect – instant victory. We want to "walk in the Spirit and let him win the victory." But God wants us to persevere in discipline toward holiness.

I've heard people say that Paul's as "For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Romans 7:15) are too strong for a Christian walking in the Spirit. But

really, what Christian can deny that this is his own experience? The truth is that the more we see the holiness of God and his Law revealed to us in the Scriptures, the more we recognise how far short we fall.

Think about Isaiah. He was a prophet who walked in the righteousness of God's commandments, and yet when he came face to face with God in all his holiness, his only response was to cry out, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isaiah 6:5).

As we grow in the *knowledge* of God's holiness, even though we're also growing in the *practice* of holiness it always seems that the gap between our knowledge and our practice gets bigger. This is the Spirit's way of drawing us to more and more holiness.

As we progress in holiness, we hate sin more and more and find greater delight in God's law (Romans 7:22). We see the perfection of his Law and the rightness of all the things he requires of us. We agree that, as St. John says, "his commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3), but are holy, righteous, and good (Romans 7:12). But during all this time we also see our own inner corruption and our frequent falls into sin. We cry out with St. Paul, "Wretched man that I am!" (Romans 7:24), and we want to give up. But we dare not go there. If we would succeed in our pursuit of holiness, we must persevere in spite of failure.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, we thank you for the indwelling gift of the Spirit, who truly is our Helper, as he opens our eyes to your truth, to your holiness, and to our sin and empowers us to follow you. Give us grace that we might be committed to the daily study and application of your Word, that we might better obey you and persevere in our pursuit of holiness. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.