

GODLINESS THROUGH DISCIPLINE

From a booklet by Dr. Jay E. Adams

Do you remember the last time you left a church service all fired up to change? You were determined to be different. "This time," you said, "I mean it; I am going to become the person God wants me to be!" By Tuesday, the fire had burned out. The last time you read a booklet like this you may have decided: "From now on..." but here you are today, pretty much the same as always. You mean well, but nothing significant seems to happen; you have been *trying*, but not really making it.

There has been some change, some growth, some blessing, but not the kind you so earnestly would like to see. Now that is the experience of many Christian people; you are not alone in this problem. Some have given up the hope of ever becoming significantly different. "Another collection of impractical platitudes," you may be thinking, as you start to put down this booklet. Don't do it! I promise you, there is practical help inside. Read on, and find out for yourself. After all, there are Christian people whom you meet from time to time whose lives are different. Somehow, they must have found the answer. You can too. You have the same God, the same Bible, and the same power available as they. Yet, there is one difference between you and them.

Why have you failed in your attempts? Why is it you rarely succeed even in your determination

to change in small ways? You *want* the right thing; yet you so rarely achieve it. Of course, there may be many reasons for this. At the bottom of it all is sin. But here let us single out one major reason (perhaps the major reason) why the gears don't seem to mesh as they should. You may have sought and tried to obtain *instant* godliness. There is no such thing. Today we have instant pudding, instant coffee, instant houses shipped on trucks, instant everything. And we want instant godliness as well. 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 Bible is very clear about how godliness comes. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul said, in contrast to all of the ways that will fail (mentioned in the first part of the verse), "Timothy, you must discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness." (1 Timothy 4:7). *Discipline* is the secret of godliness.

The word *discipline* has disappeared from our minds, our mouths, our pulpits, and our culture. We hardly know what discipline means in modern American society. And yet, there is no other way to attain godliness; *discipline is the path to godliness*. You must learn to discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.

The first thing to notice is there is no option about being godly. Paul's words constitute a divine command by which God tells us to discipline ourselves for that purpose. God intends for His children to be godly. It is clear He wants them to be godly, since He orders them to discipline themselves for godliness. In other places, He says, "Be holy as I am holy," and "Be perfect as I am perfect." It is certain we will never reach perfection in this life (1 John 1:8), but perfect godliness is the goal every believer must discipline himself toward every day. This means becoming more like God Himself each day. Godliness is the goal of the Christian life; we must please God by being, thinking, doing, saying and feeling the way He wants us to.

Notice God says we are to discipline ourselves "for the purpose of (or, literally, *toward*) godliness." The original language means to be *oriented toward* godliness. Your whole life ought to be disciplined (i.e. structured, set up, organized, and running day by day) toward the goal of godliness. Everything you do should contribute toward reaching that goal. Monday through Saturday, not only Sunday, you must move toward the goal, one step, or two steps or ten steps further down the road. You will become that much more like God only because of what you have done, thought, and said each day.

When your life is oriented toward (or focused upon) godliness, the goal

will constantly come into your mind. You will think at work, at home, or in school, "I am to reflect Him in this project." Isn't that what you want? If you believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior, you *must* want that. There are times, of course, when you are discouraged, tired, or become upset and lose sight of the goal. You may even rebel against the idea. But if you are a genuine believer in Christ, the well never runs dry; down in your heart, the desire trickles back, and you find yourself saying, "That is what I want." It is true you "hunger and thirst after righteousness."

When Paul wrote, "You are a new creature; all things have become new," he meant the Holy Spirit has oriented you toward God and His holiness, putting a new focus on all of life. But that does not automatically make you godly. Because of the work of Christ, you have been *counted* perfect in God's sight, but actually you are still far from the goal. Yet, your new life in Christ is oriented toward godliness; that is why at times you ache for it.

The problem is though your orientation is new, many of your day-by-day practices are not yet oriented toward godliness. The "old man" (old ways of living) is still your unwelcome companion. So seldom do you see your life practically oriented toward godliness that perhaps you have despaired. You must not. The reason your good resolves have not been realized may be because you have not learned how

to *discipline* yourself for godliness. "How can I discipline myself?" you ask insistently. First, you must recognize the very word 'discipline' makes it clear that godliness cannot happen immediately. It cannot be whipped up like instant pudding. Discipline means *work*; it means *sustained* daily effort.

The word Paul used ('discipline') is the one from which the English words *gymnastics* and *gymnasium* have been derived. It is a term clearly related to athletics. An athlete becomes an expert only by years of hard practice. There are no instant athletes. Do you think Brooks Robinson became one of the world's greatest third basemen simply by appearing at the stadium in Baltimore one afternoon after he had decided that morning he was going to play ball? Do you think it is only when there is a game that he plays? You know otherwise. You know he has spent countless hours practicing. When you watch him in action, it is hard not to conclude he was born with a glove in his hand. It takes years of regular practice to achieve such skill.

No weight lifter, for example, says, "Here is a very heavy weight. I never lifted weights before, but that looks like the largest one. I'll try to press it." He is likely to break his back. He can't do it that way. He must start out with a small weight the first week, then gradually over the months and years add heavier and heavier ones. He must work up to the heaviest one.

Nor does he decide, "This week I'll lift weights for five hours on Friday and then I'll forget about it for the next six weeks." Athletes must practice regularly, usually every day for at least a short period of time. They work daily, day after day, until what they are doing is "natural" (i.e. second nature) to them.

That is exactly what is involved in the word Paul used here. Continued daily effort is an essential element of Christian *discipline* (training).

What does this involve? In Luke 9:23, Jesus commands His disciples: "Take up your cross *daily*," denying the self. He does not mean denying yourself *something*. There is no idea of doing penance. "For Lent, I'll stop chewing gum," says the penitent. That is exactly **not** what is in view. Rather, Jesus insisted Christians must deny *the self* within them. By the self, He meant the old desires, the old ways, the old practices, the old habit patterns that were acquired before conversion. They became so much a part of daily practice that *they* became second nature. We were born sinners, but it took practice to develop our particular styles of sinning. That is why Paul says the believer must deny (literally say "no" to) the self daily.

Daily denial of the self indicates the presence of an ongoing battle inside the Christian. Believers must "take up the cross" as an instrument of death upon which to crucify the self every day. Taking up the cross

doesn't mean carrying some heavy burden. It means putting to death the old life patterns of the old person.

But that is not enough. Whenever God says "put off," He also says "put on." On the positive side, each day one must seek to "follow" Jesus Christ. That is what it means to discipline oneself for godliness. It means to continue to say "no" to self and to say "yes" to Christ every day until one by one all of the old habitual ways are replaced by new ones. By daily endeavors to follow God's Son, one finds that doing so is more "natural" than not doing so. The Holy Spirit enables a believer to put off the old self and put on the new self.

The new ways reflect the true righteousness and holiness that is in Jesus Christ. Our image of God was ruined by the Fall. The process of sanctification begins to remake the Christian's life as it originally did in Adam's life. That is what discipline toward godliness is all about. In the final analysis, godliness is becoming, by grace, like God once again.

God gave humanity a marvelous capacity that we call **habit**.

Whenever we do something long enough, it becomes a part of us. For example, did you button your shirt up or down today? Ah, it took you a minute to answer, didn't it? You don't think about where to begin any more; you just **do** it. You don't consciously say to yourself, "Now, I'm going to button my shirt this morning; I shall begin at the top."

You just do it without thinking about it. Think of the first time you sat behind an automobile wheel. What a frightening experience that was. You thought, "Here is a wheel, and here is a gear shift, and here is a complex instrument panel, and foot pedals down below. I have to learn how to use and coordinate all of these! And at the same time, I must look out for stripes painted down the middle of the road, and signs along the roadway and pedestrians and automobiles, and . . . How will I ever do it?" Can you remember back to that time? But now—*now* what do you do? At midnight on a moonless night, you slide into the car seat as someone else slips into the seat beside you. Deftly, you insert the key into the slot, turn on the motor, shift the gears, back out of the driveway into the street and start down the road, all the while talking about some abstruse point of theology! What an amazing feat it is when you think about it! You have learned to perform highly complex behavior unconsciously. By *disciplined* practice, driving became a part of you. It became second nature to you. That is what Paul was talking to Timothy about.

The writer of Hebrews (5:13ff.) speaks clearly about this matter. There he is upbraiding the Hebrew Christians because, although they had received so much teaching of God's Word, they had not profited from it. The reason was that they had not *used* it. Consequently, when they ought to have been teachers, they still needed to be taught. He says

everyone “who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness for he is a baby” (vs. 13). He continues: “But solid food (meat & potatoes) is for the mature who *because of practice* (because they have done it so often) have their senses trained to discern between good and evil.” It makes godliness “natural.” If you **practice** what God tells you to do, the obedient life will become a part of you. There is no simple, quick, easy way to instant godliness. You protest, “I can’t seem to be able to do it.” You have practiced *something*; you have developed some unconscious patterns. As a sinful human being bent toward sin, you have practiced sinful practices so that they have become a part of you, just as they have become a part of all of us.

There is no question the habit capacity is there. The problem is it has been used for the wrong purposes. Habits can be used for good or evil. You can’t avoid habitual living because this is the way God made you. He gave you the ability to have a life that does not demand conscious thought about every action or response. It is a great blessing God made you this way. It would be unbearable if every time you did anything you found it necessary to think consciously about it. Imagine yourself each morning saying, “Now, let’s see, how do I brush my teeth? First, I have to get the toothpaste tube and roll it from the bottom, etc., etc.” It is a great benefit you don’t have to consciously

think about everything you do, or you probably would not get to breakfast by midnight.

Practice is indifferent; it can work either as a blessing or a curse, depending on *what* you have practiced. It is what you feed into your life that matters—just like the data fed into a computer. The end product is good or bad according to the raw material provided for it. That is just like habit capability. In 2 Peter 2:14, Peter speaks about people whose hearts are “**trained** in greed.” Trained is the same word Paul used (*gymnazo*), the word from which *gymnastics* comes. A heart that has been **exercised** in greediness has become natural. Without consciously thinking about it, such a person “automatically” behaves greedily in situations where the temptation is present.

Since God made you with the capacity for living according to habit, you must consciously take a hard look at your life. You must become aware of your life patterns and evaluate them by the Word of God. What you learned to do as a child may be continuing in your adulthood. Pattern by pattern, you must analyze and determine whether it has developed from practice in doing God’s will or whether it has developed as a sinful response. As they are discovered, the old sinful ways must be replaced by new patterns from God’s Word. That is the meaning of disciplined living. Discipline first requires

self-examination; then it means crucifixion of the old sinful ways, (saying “no” daily) and finally, practice following Jesus Christ in new ways by the guidance and strength the Holy Spirit provides through His Word. The biblical way to godliness is not easy or simple, but it is the solid way.

A counselee wondered—as perhaps you are wondering—whether these sorts of changes are possible. He asked, “Can a fifty year old man change his ways?” He was deadly serious. There I sat, a forty-two year old counselor thinking, “Will it be only eight more years before they can refrigerate me?!” Can this really be for *you*? Can *you* start to live a life that really will be godly? Positively! That is what I told my counselee. I continued, “When I was ten years old I learned how to yo-yo, and now many years later I was able to pick up a yo-yo and found the old skills were still with me.” The question is not whether a fifty year old man can change; the real question is can *anybody* change once he has learned something? Perhaps you haven’t ridden a bike for years, yet you know you *could* do so. It probably wouldn’t take you five minutes to “get the feel of it” again. It would come right back to you. The question is not whether a fifty year old man can learn; the question is can *anyone*—even a ten year old—forget, once he has learned a wrong practice? The answer is yes, by the grace of God, anyone can change. When you discipline yourself for

righteousness, you don’t have to do it alone. “. . . it is God who works in you” (Philippians 2:13). All holiness, all righteousness, all godliness is the “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22–23). It takes nothing less than the power of the Spirit to replace sinful habits with righteous ones for a ten year old or a fifty year old. God never said once a person reaches fifty or forty or eighty that he is incapable of change. Look what Abraham did as an old man. Look at the tremendous changes God demanded of him in old age. The Holy Spirit can change any Christian, and does. As Christians, we should never fear change. We must believe in change oriented toward godliness. The Christian life is one of continual change. In the Scriptures, it is called a *walk*, not rest. We can never say in this life, “I have finally made it.” We cannot say, “There is nothing more to learn from God’s Word, nothing more to put into practice tomorrow, no more skills to develop, no more sins to be dealt with.” When Christ said, “Take up your cross daily and follow Me,” He put an end to all such thinking. He represented the Christian life as a daily struggle to change. **You** can change if the Spirit of God dwells within you. Of course, if He does not, there is no such hope.

Too many Christians give up. They want the change too soon. They really want change without the daily struggle. Sometimes they give up when they are on the very threshold of success. It usually takes at least three weeks of proper daily

effort for one to feel comfortable in performing a new practice. And it takes about three more weeks to make the practice part of oneself. But many Christians don't continue even for three days. If they do not receive instant success, they get discouraged. If they don't get it now, they quit.

Remember when you learned how to ice skate? What happened the first time you went out on the ice? Zip bang! You got a wet bottom. Nobody ever learns to skate without falling at first. You had a decision to make as you sat there freezing. "Am I going to continue this, or should I give up the whole idea of learning to ice skate?" Perhaps, you did quit after the first or second failure and have never learned since. A lot of people make that decision. They do not consider learning to skate worth the embarrassment, awkwardness, trouble and fear. But others go on in spite of it all. They get up, brush off and start out again; Zip bang! Zip bang! Zip bang! Something has begun to happen. Before long, you get a little better. If you practice long enough, you will no longer have a problem with skating; instead, you will be concerned about how to get the puck into the net. There comes a point at which activity *begins* to become a part of you, but only when you stay with it long enough.

Perhaps, you have been afraid to talk to someone about Christ. Maybe you tried it once or twice, and as far as you were concerned, you went zip bang! Let's suppose you *did* get

a "wet bottom." What of it? Is that so bad? Was that a good reason to give up? Certainly not; that is simply part of learning to skate (or witness, or love). Suppose you have found it difficult to read the Scriptures and pray daily; was that a good reason for quitting? No! You probably did not have short-term goals—like today, I shall do this, then this week, that, and then in three weeks, the other. But, if you had skated every day for three weeks, you probably would be a skater by now. If you really want to be godly, you are going to have to stay out on the ice. Don't let the wet bottoms discourage you. If you are willing to get wet enough, you **will** learn how to skate.

In counseling, I continually encounter one outstanding failure among Christians: a lack of what the Bible calls "endurance;" they give up. Perhaps, this is the key to godliness through discipline. You wouldn't have learned to ice skate, you wouldn't have learned to use a yo-yo, button your shirt, or drive an automobile if you hadn't persisted long enough. You learned because you endured in spite of failures and embarrassments until the desired behavior became part of you. You trained yourself by practice to do what you wanted to learn. God says the same is true about godliness.

All the stress the Bible puts on human effort must not be misunderstood; we are talking about grace motivated effort, not the work of the flesh. It is not effort apart

from the Holy Spirit that produces godliness. Rather, it is through the power of the Holy Spirit alone that one can endure. By his own effort, a man may persist in learning to skate, but he will not persist in the pursuit of godliness. A Christian does *good works* because the Spirit first works in him. Now, the work of the Spirit is not mystical. The Holy Spirit has plainly told us how He works. He says *in* the Scriptures He ordinarily works *through* the Scriptures. The Bible is the Holy Spirit's book. He inspired it. He moved its authors to write every wonderful word you may read there. This is the sharp tool by which He accomplishes His work. He did not give us the Book only to say we could lay it aside and forget it in the process of becoming godly. Godliness does not come by osmosis. Your own ideas and efforts will never produce it. There is no easier path to godliness than the prayerful study and obedient practice of the Word of God.

The Spirit took pains to raise up men and mold them to fitly write His Book. Under His good providence, they developed the vocabularies and styles in the kinds of life situations that He required. Thus, they could write a Book of exactly the sort He wanted to meet our needs. He was careful to assure not one word was penned falsely; in His Book there are no errors. It is wholly true and inerrant; it is the dependable Word of God. Do you think after going to all of that trouble the Holy Spirit now zaps instant holiness into us apart

from the Bible? The Spirit ordinarily works through His Word. So, if we want to discipline ourselves toward godliness, a most essential factor is the regular study of God's Word in order to make application of its principles to our problems. It is by willing, prayerful and persistent obedience to the requirements of the Scriptures that godly patterns are developed. When we read about them we must then ask God by His grace to help us live accordingly. He has given the Holy Spirit to us for this purpose. The word *grace* has several meanings in the Bible, one of which is "help." When we ask, "Lord, enable us, through following Christ daily in His Word, to become like Him, the Holy Spirit "helps" us to do it. The Holy Spirit gives help when His people read His Word and then step out by faith to do as He says. He does not promise to strengthen us unless we do so; the power often comes *in the doing*.

In 2 Timothy 3:17, Paul mentions four things the Scriptures do for the believer. First, they **teach** what God requires. Secondly, they **convict** of sin by revealing how we have fallen short of those requirements. Thirdly, they "**set us up straight again.**" Lastly, they **train** or *discipline* in righteousness. This fourth benefit of the Bible means a structured training in doing righteousness. If you use the Bible every day, the Book will discipline you. Disciplined, structured living is what you need. Structure alone brings freedom.

Discipline brings liberty. Our whole age has been brainwashed into believing the opposite is true. Today, we are told we can get freedom and liberty only by throwing out structure and discipline. But, suppose I wanted to learn how to play the organ and decided to forget all discipline and structure. I would ignore the laws of harmony and laugh at the chromatic scale. Calling disciplined, structured practice nonsense, I might declare, "I want to play freely so I shall sit down at the organ and play." It might take the next five minutes to discover how to turn it on. Finally, finding the switch, I pull out all sorts of stops, raise my hands, and go drummpgfh! Sheer cacophony! Noise! My "freedom" from structure and discipline has yielded only ear shattering shrieks and growls. I have not learned to play the instrument. I cannot make music that way. But, if I take the long hard road of *do re mi fa so la ti do*, day after day, week after week, until finally the fingers work properly and the toes become nimble, the first thing you know, I can play! If I continue, the time may come when I can throw away the books and sheet music and write my own. But, this can happen only if I come through the hard route of structure. The order is: *first*, structured discipline, *then* freedom; there is no other.

Liberty comes through law, not apart from it. When is a train most free? Is it when it goes bouncing across the field off the track? It is free only when it is confined (if you will) to

the track. Then, it runs smoothly and efficiently because this was the way its maker designed it to run. It needs to be structured by the track to run properly. You too need to be on the track. God's track is found in His Word. It is conforming to that structure by the grace of God that makes people godly.

Here is your answer: Read the the Scriptures regularly, and prayerfully do as they say regardless of how you feel. That last point perhaps points to the biggest problem of all. We give up because we don't feel like doing something. You probably didn't feel like getting up this morning. But, you had to in spite of how you felt. After you were up for awhile, you began to feel differently, and you were glad you acted against your feelings. From that first decision, the rest of the day is filled with similar decisions that must be made on the basis of obedience to God rather than capitulation to contrary feelings.

There is much we don't feel like doing. There are only two ways to live, and they reflect two kinds of faith and morality. One faith, life and morality says, "I will live according to feeling." The other says, "I will live as God says." It all goes back to the garden. When man sinned he abandoned the commandment oriented life of love for the feeling oriented life of lust. There are only two kinds of life, the feeling motivated life of sin oriented toward self, and the commandment motivated life of holiness oriented

toward godliness. Living according to feeling is the greatest obstacle to godliness we face. Godly, commandment oriented living comes only from biblical structure and discipline.

Are you godly? If not, what are you going to do about it? There is only one possible way to become godly; you must be disciplined toward godliness. But, no one can be disciplined by the Word toward godliness until first he recognizes his sin against a holy God. If you are truly sorry you have ignored Him and lived in your own ungodly way up until now, then turn to His Son in faith and be saved. Jesus Christ is the only real godly man. Your sin will be reckoned as His, and His godliness will be reckoned yours if you trust in His death and resurrection for your salvation. If the Spirit of God has convicted you of your sin and need for a Savior, turn to Christ now. Believe on Him as He is offered in the good news: as the One who took all of the punishment for His people. Will you believe He died for you—in

your place—suffering God's wrath for your sin? Pray for Jesus to come into your heart; ask Him to become your Lord. If you do, you will be saved. Join the rest of us who by the grace of God have the unspeakable privilege and peerless challenge of disciplining ourselves toward godliness—toward Christ Himself!

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Summary of Main Points

- Discipline is the path to godliness.
- Discipline (training) comes from sustained daily effort.
- Habits are God-given gifts that can be used for good or evil.
- Through discipline (training) and the Holy Spirit, bad habits can be changed into godly (good) habits.
- Godly freedom comes through structured discipline.