Growing in Self-Discipline

Last in the series “Life Skills for Happiness and Success.”

# Scripture: 2 Peter 1:5-9; 1 Cor. 9:24-27

# Key Thought: Growing in self-discipline is essential to the abundant life that God desires for us.

# Intro:

Jerry Rice is known as one of the best wide receivers ever to play the game of football. Of course, he had amazing physical talents. “Hall of Fame football coach Bill Walsh said, “I don’t think there’s been a guy equal to him physically.” Yet that alone [did] not made him great. The real key to his success [was] his self-discipline. He work[ed] and prepar[ed] – day in and day out – unlike anyone else in professional football.” (From The 21 Indisputable Qualities of a Leader by John C Maxwell p. 126)

These days many of us are following the Boston Red Sox carefully. One of the current stars is D. J. Martinez. One night I was listening to Alex Cora comment about Mr. Martinez. Alex said that no one on the team works harder than D. J. does. He is among the most disciplined preparers on a very prepared Red Sox team. After they clinched the AL East title this year, the next day they played in Cleveland and very few of the top stars were in the lineup. But D. J. Martinez requested to play. He did not want time off. He wanted to be in there hitting to gain more experience before play-offs.

John C. Maxwell, number one expert on leadership in the world today began his career as a pastor in a rural Indiana church in a very small denomination. But John Maxwell uses his time better than anyone I have ever met. For example, when he travels, he gathers folders of his current projects to work on as he travels so that not a moment is lost.

Today I want to encourage us in self-discipline. I know I need such encouragement constantly and think most of us do.

# What is self-discipline?

## Something we are commanded to learn

We know that self-discipline is important, but we may need reminding that this sometimes-elusive character asset is also a characteristic that the Bible commands us to work on. Our modern minds might get a little lost in the long series that Peter gives us in the text so let’s just leave out some words to make a point. Peter says,

Make every effort to add to your faith…self-control…” 2 Peter 1:6

## It’s not negative; it is positive

When we think of self-discipline, our first thought is self-denial. We picture an ice cream cone or a Big Mac with a red line through them. But the root idea of self-discipline is not negative, it is positive.

To be disciplined is to have power over, and mastery over ourselves, our habits, our thoughts, our words and our lives. It includes the idea of self-restraint, but it is even more linked to the idea of training ourselves.

For this reason, I also chose the passage in first Corinthians for us to study today.

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. 1 Cor. 9:24-25 NRSV

The same Greek root word referring to discipline is in this verse too [egkrateuomai].

## Self-Discipline is for higher purposes

Here Paul also uses the realm of athletics to illustrate our need for self-discipline. It is important to note as this verse readily points out that discipline is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. Athletes do not discipline themselves for the sake of being disciplined. They discipline themselves for the sake of being excellent at their chosen sports. They discipline themselves for the sake of peak performance in a playoff game. They discipline themselves in order to win at their sport.

In the same way, Peter points out that the ultimate purpose for Christians to be self-disciplined is twofold. The immediate goal is that we might be effective and productive as disciples of Christ. That is something we all desire. We want to make a difference. Peter is telling us that discipline is one of the keys to making a difference. And then Peter tells us that the ultimate goal is for us to receive “a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:11 NIV). That is our ultimate win, the long-range purpose of our disciplined service for Jesus. When Jesus comes again or when Jesus comes for us, we will be better prepared to hear the Master’s approving words, “Well-done, good and faithful servant.” So, self-discipline is worth working for. It’s worth talking about and studying. It’s worth making every effort to grow in this virtue.

## Our natural propensity for self-discipline is related to childhood discipline

Solomon helps us understand self-discipline.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction. Prov 1:7

The Hebrew word translated as “instruction” means chastisement, reproof or instruction. It is sometimes translated as discipline in the sense of a father disciplining a child. You might ask why I bring this up. The reason is this.

Our ability for self-discipline is related to the discipline we receive as a child. An undisciplined child will find self-discipline hard. A well-disciplined child will find a self-control much more compatible with his slant her nature.

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# Positive personal discipline brings rewards.

We also need to see the contrast that Solomon paints for us.

## Lack of discipline is deadly

On the one hand, lack of discipline is deadly. Here is a sobering warning also from Proverbs.

For your ways are in full view of the Lord, and he examines all your paths.  
The evil deeds of the wicked ensnare them; the cords of their sins hold them fast.  
For lack of discipline they will die, led astray by their own great folly. Prov 5:21-23

We tend to think of the severity of this warning as the hyperbole of a teacher. But just stop to think of the known health consequences of issues like addictions, obesity, and sexual promiscuity and we realize that the warning of the wise man is more literal than we think.

No wonder Proverbs 1:7 puts a label on it and states, “Fools despise discipline.” Ouch!

Because we lack discipline we might:

* Eat too much and become obese
* Spend more than we earn
* Have poor work habits
* Become enslaved to harmful habits
* Become morally lax and fall into sexual sins
* Watch media passively and too much
* Neglect daily Bible readying and prayer
* Fail to achieve our dreams

## Positive disciplines are life-giving

But if lack of discipline is deadly, on good side, positive disciplines are life-giving.

The wise man, Solomon wrote,

Whoever heeds discipline shows the way to life, but whoever ignores correction leads others astray. Prov 10:17

(The same Hebrew word [musar] translated discipline is in all three of these Proverbs passages.)

Peter prefaced the list of characteristics that we are to add to our faith by saying that God has given to us everything we need for life and godliness! Peter is saying that self-discipline is one of those things we need for the abundant life that God wants us to have. And God will help us to possess it. God will supply all that we need for living life to the full!

Good personal discipline:

* Helps us to have good health and extend our lives
* gives additional time for our goals, for others, and for ourselves
* helps us to financial security
* helps us have money to give
* saves us from vices
* helps us maintain spiritual health through daily devotions and weekly worship
* increases order and decreases chaos in our lives

# How to grow in self-discipline

## It is a fruit of God’s Spirit in us

First, self-control or self-discipline is one of the fruits of the Spirit’s presence in our lives. (The Greek word in Gal 5:23 is the same one I mentioned earlier.)

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.   
Gal 5:22-23 NIV

So, the first way that we grow in self-discipline is to ask God for help through his Holy Spirit.

## Grow in discipline through our work habits

John Maxwell gives 5 actions steps for leaders who want self-discipline to be an asset to their lives. Most anyone can relate to them easily.

1. Develop and follow your priorities… If you can determine what’s really a priority and release yourself from everything else, it’s a lot easier to follow through on what’s important. And that’s the essence of self-discipline.
2. Make a disciplined lifestyle your goal…. One of the best ways to do that is to develop systems and routines, especially in areas crucial to your long-term growth and success.
3. Challenge your excuses. To develop a lifestyle of discipline, one of the first tasks must be to challenge and eliminate any tendency to make excuses.
4. Remove rewards until the job is done…. If you lack self-discipline, you may be in the habit of having dessert before eating your vegetables.
5. Stay focused on results…. Count the benefits of doing what’s right, and then dive in.  
     
   John C. Maxwell in The 21 Indisputable Qualities of a Leader by John C Maxwell p. 128-130

## Learn discipline through exercise habits

Many people profit from habits of exercise. Those who are runners or who lift weights or swim etc. make a habit for exercise sake and soon find that the idea of using a habit to get something accomplished in their life helps them to discipline their lives in other ways. The brain learns the pattern of discipline. One positive habit can help us from other positive ones.

## Spiritual disciplines help us with self-control

Paul tell us;

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. 1 Tim 4:8 NIV

In another place Paul urged Timothy, “Train yourself to be godly” (1 Tim. 4:7). The Greek word that he used is the word from which we get the word gymnasium. It was a word that referred to physical training for the Greek Olympic type games.

Author Jay Adams put it this way:

“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.” (Jay Adams in Godliness Through Discipline quoted in Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life by Donald S Whitney)

One of the time-tested ways to grow in self-discipline is through the classic spiritual disciplines.

If anything characterizes modern Protestantism, it is the absence of spiritual disciplines or spiritual exercises. Yet such disciplines form the core of the life of devotion. It is not an exaggeration to state that this is the lost dimension of modern Protestantism. (By Donald Bloesch in The Crisis of Piety quoted by Donald S Whitney in Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life p. 195)

What kind of spiritual exercises help us to strengthen our discipline?

I think the short answer is that any one of the spiritual disciplines which we make into a habit will help -- giving thanks, serving others, worship, to name a few. But here are the four spiritual disciplines that are often recommended as aids to learning discipline.

1. I particularly recommend setting aside a daily devotional time. Learning to make a habit of setting aside a particular time each day to read and pray and spend time with God helps us to begin to discipline our time. Time is a precious gift.
2. Fasting is a recommended classical spiritual discipline. Fasting usually means not eating one or more meals for the sake of spiritual purposes. We don’t fast simply for self-denial, we fast purposefully to seek guidance or express grief or pray for a special request or prepare spiritually for a challenge. But in the process of disciplining ourselves to not eat for a preset period of time, we exercise our willpower and it becomes a little easier to do it the next time. Fasting helps break the hold that bodily urges have over us just a little more with God’s help.
3. The book of James tells us that anyone who can control his tongue is also able to control the rest of his body (James 3:2). So, the discipline of being intentionally quiet for a time; or spending time intentionally alone for a period also can help us to build our self-control.
4. Lastly, the regular practice of giving of our finances to God helps us in self-discipline. Anyone who has ever decided to take the Bible’s 10% goal for charitable giving seriously knows that it takes discipline to organize your finances to make that happen, especially when you first begin. But once you do begin, the habits of calculating and setting aside and financial planning that a regular practice of tithing requires helps us immensely toward fiscal self-discipline. Just giving to God and/or a charity whatever is conveniently left in our wallet or check book will never do that.

Notice that these four suggestions all work from a different area of our lives. The discipline of daily devotions targets our need for time alone with God on a regular basis and uses that area of our lives to build discipline. Fasting targets our daily conflict with our bodily desires. It begins to teach us that we can subdue those cravings to higher purposes, by the grace of God. Maybe, just maybe, the idea of allowing the mind and the Spirit to rule rather than the body will grow on us. The third, silence, targets our undisciplined speech. What a fire the tongue can light, and the book of James warns us bluntly that it is often set on fire by hell. A time of silence before God allows us to cry out for help in controlling what the Bible calls an “unruly evil” (James 3:8). And the last discipline, tithing, targets our selfishness and our lack of discipline with our money. But each one of the four spiritual disciplines can help us to learn to allow God to be more in control in our lives and help us to add to our faith –self-control as Peter advises.

# Conclusion – A Prayer

Our Father, thank you again for providing for us everything we need for life and godliness. Please forgive us when we share in our American culture’s hatred for a disciplined life. Out of necessity, we manage to make a habit of work, but we find it hard to be regular in making time for prayer and devotion and Bible study. Many of us struggle to maintain good disciplines to care for our bodies which are a gift from you and are the temples for your Spirit’s indwelling. Perhaps some of us need to discipline our tongues so that irreverent, hurtful and unedifying words might be eliminated from our vocabularies. All of us need your help to add in positive disciplines of service and witness by your Spirit’s grace. O God, we desire to be both effective and productive as your servants and we want to be ready to someday hear those words, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Help us to receive from you of this fruit of your Spirit’s presence called self-discipline. In Jesus’ name, AMEN