

John Dunn lives in Sydney and runs a consultancy company specialising in the design of trains and trams. He is the author of several engineering publications as well as numerous study notes and commentaries on the Scriptures. He is a member of St Paul's Anglican Church in Chatswood.

The idea of self-control or self-discipline is almost foreign to our culture. This attitude has invaded the church to such an extent that many Christians have no sense of the urgent need for holiness of life and genuine discipleship. Behind this shortcoming there often lies a low view of the grace of God and a shallow understanding of the wonder of his forgiveness.

Running the Race is a call to Christians to get back to biblical basics in the areas of personal self-discipline, holy living, being disciples of Christ and having right goals. It looks at the necessity for a consistent walk with the Lord in Bible study, prayer, worship and living in the Spirit. The author urges readers to take seriously the dire necessity to bring one's mind, body and conduct under the authority of Scripture. This affects all areas of living including our attitude to work, the use of time and money, and right conduct within our relationships. Christian self-discipline is shown to be fundamental not only to a right perspective on life here and now, but pivotal in setting our goals so that we will be in step with God's ultimate intention to bring us into glory as his sons and daughters who reflect the character of his Son, Jesus Christ.



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Running the RACE

John Dunn

Running **the RACE**

DISCIPLINED CHRISTIAN LIVING

John Dunn

Running the Race:

Disciplined Christian Living

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The Grace of Giving

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Letters to Brian and Daniel

John Dunn

NEW CREATION PUBLICATIONS INC.
PO Box 403, Blackwood, South Australia 5051
2003

Published by
NEW CREATION PUBLICATIONS INC., AUSTRALIA
PO Box 403, Blackwood, South Australia 5051

© John Dunn 2003

National Library of Australia cataloguing-in-publication data
Dunn, John, 1938-.
Running the Race: disciplined Christian living.

ISBN 0 86408 260 6.

1. Christian Life. I. Title.

248.4

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Cover by *Jane McLean Design*

Wholly set and printed at
NEW CREATION PUBLICATIONS INC.
Coromandel East, South Australia

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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. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

2 Timothy 4:6-8

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>ix</i>
1. Self Control! What For?	1
2. The Goal Is Holiness	13
3. Discipline in the Life of Christ	28
4. The Discipline of Grace	39
5. Disciplined towards Right Goals	51
6. Disciplined Discipleship	64
7. The Renewed Will	76
8. What about Indwelling Sin?	86
9. Being Spirit-Controlled	100
10. Discipline and Bible Study—1	111
11. Discipline and Bible Study—2	123
12. The Christian Conscience	134
13. Disciplined Praying—1	147
14. Disciplined Praying—2	160
15. Disciplined Worship	171
16. The Renewed Mind	185

17.The Disciplined Body	197
18.Ordering Our Time	212
19.Vocation and Work	225
20.Money Matters	238
21.Habit Patterns	250
22.Self-Control in Relationships	264
23.God’s Ultimate Intention	278

Preface

When I came to a personal faith in Jesus Christ in the mid-1950s, no one told me I ought to give serious thought as to how I conducted myself—at home, at work and with other believers—now that I had become a Christian. I was counselled to rush out and tell people about Jesus, read my Bible and pray each day. The idea of discipleship was hardly mentioned. If it was, then it was often couched in some well-meaning, but rather vague instruction about ‘following Jesus’. But I don’t recall ever hearing anyone teach me in those early days the hard facts of the Bible and what that discipleship really meant. The need for godly living was not raised to any great extent. There was a lot of teaching about evangelism and of going overseas as a missionary, but the matter of self-discipline or self-control was never mentioned as being an imperative in relation to a holy life. Nor did anyone teach me that I was justified in God’s eyes, free from guilt and therefore constituted holy because of Christ. I had no idea that I had been ‘set apart’ in Christ before the foundation of the world and that, in my moment of coming to faith, I had been declared righteous before the Father. I thought it was all up to me to make it ‘work’ now that I had believed in Jesus. Of course, I wanted others to know Christ and was consumed by a passion to tell those around me about him, but I gave almost no thought to

the quality of life and conduct which ought to have accompanied my eagerness. As someone has said, I may have made the Bible my textbook for evangelism, but I had overlooked or neglected its use in building up character.

It was some way down the track before these important issues began to exercise my mind. Meantime the damage had been done. Although many had indeed come to know the Lord, I'd blown my witness to lots of others by living as a zealous Christian but in a way that did little to commend Christ. What I *said* to them was not matched by a life that was consistent with the truth of God's word. Of course there were many times when I felt terrible about my conduct and attitude. I wanted to be different. I had no desire to be a hypocrite. But I couldn't see the way ahead. I never managed to make the connection between the word I so passionately believed in and the need for that word to be lived out in a godly way on a day-to-day basis. The outcome was that, spiritually, I went up and down like a yo-yo!

It was not until my understanding of grace began to mature that things changed. I began to see that the 'Gospel' I had originally heard left much to be desired. I saw that much of what I had been taught in those early years—and what I myself was then teaching—was shallow and inadequate. I wouldn't go so far as to say it was not really the truth, but rather, that it was a simplistic message which didn't really focus on the centrality of the Cross and the grace of God. At that stage I had almost no understanding of God's *total* forgiveness of a person through Christ. It was only when these great truths began to grip me that my conduct and level of self-discipline began to alter and so conform more with the Scriptures.

It is my conviction that this is a problem which faces many Christians today—especially the young. They have

come to faith in Christ by one means or another and genuinely believe in the Lord and have a sense that he loves them. They have a certain zeal to be involved in the activities of the Church, but that's about it. They have been taught very little about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. They are not clear as to what it really means to *live* as a Christian. They may not even really know that they are totally forgiven. Perhaps there has been very little repentance in their conversion and therefore not much has changed in their lifestyle patterns. They may have had no teaching whatever about the wonderful indwelling Holy Spirit. They may be enthusiastic in wanting to serve the Lord (as I was) but have not matched that zeal with a life that has a genuine cutting edge to it. They fit in 'God's work' where it is convenient, but basically go about life very much as before. What seems to be missing so much these days is the great dynamic of the Gospel of grace by which believers are thrust forward to live in a way that is consistent with who and what they are 'in Christ'. Very few these days seem to have the 'big picture' of what God is on about in history and the extraordinary part we have in his grand plan and purpose.

It was out of the concern I felt in seeing this lack in the lives of my young Christian friends at Chatswood that I was prompted to write this book. It was first put together as a series of weekly studies for one of my home groups back in the mid-1980s, but has since been expanded and revised to this present volume. I have to assume some have been helped by this material, although I also know that others have found it 'too much' and have virtually walked away from serious Christian living as a result. Maybe it just highlighted and exposed what was never really there in the first place. I don't know and must not judge.

Some of my non-Christian friends who volunteered to go through these chapters were appalled by what they read. They saw me as advocating a hard and harsh life that was totally unacceptable in their minds. Of course, in one sense they were right. Self-discipline in the moral realm—such as I am talking about in this book—is meaningless unless a person really knows the Lord. Only Christ can change one’s perspective. Only he makes the difference. Only grace alters one’s motives. And only the rich enabling of the Holy Spirit empowering a person *from within* can make Christian discipleship and Christian self-discipline possible, meaningful and richly rewarding.

All I can do is encourage my readers to view these matters biblically. See what the Scriptures are really saying about godly living. See what it is that God is doing in our human history to bring men and women back into a living relationship with himself in order for them to be *like* him—here and now! Put aside any preconceived ideas about what it means to ‘be a Christian’ and consider what the New Testament is really saying about conduct, behaviour, holiness, witness, self-control, and so on. Above all, know that nothing we attempt to do has any substance or credibility if it does not flow out of what God has already done for us through Christ. He is our holiness and it is only through him that we have a right standing before the Father. It is entirely due to Christ that we are accepted by God as those who are *already* holy in his eyes. Work out from that truth, not towards it! It is because we are holy in his sight that we ought to live in a holy way here and now. That’s the whole point and purpose of self-discipline in the life of the believer.

It is in this light that I echo Paul’s plea to his fellow believers in Ephesus:

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:1–3).

And foundational to this whole matter of self-discipline is the injunction Peter gave to his readers:

Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’ (1 Pet. 1:13–16).

Our goal in self-discipline and self-control is holiness of life precisely because God himself is holy. Our sights should be on that target every day. But holiness is not just some worthy commodity to be obtained or a lofty personal goal to be reached, it is always the gracious, sovereign work of God in us. Self-control is the product of his Spirit authoring our endeavours and enabling us to do and be all that he would want. It is God at work in us as we cooperate in working with him to be more and more like Christ.

*John Dunn
Chatswood, NSW
April 2003*

1

Self-Control! What For?

Like a city breached, without walls, is one who lacks self-control (Prov. 25:28).

The idea of self-control or self-discipline is almost foreign to our culture.¹ It is often considered by many to be old-fashioned, unnecessary and even pointless. However, since the Bible has a great deal to teach on the subject, it is not a matter of indifference for the Christian.

Generally speaking, the Church seems to say very little on the topic. As a result, the conduct of some Christians appears to be less aligned to the Scriptures and more akin to the spirit of the world. Many young believers no longer consider it important how they live, how they behave, what they say or where they go. Such issues have become very much a matter of personal preference and are rarely related to what the Bible says about God's purposes, his honour, our spiritual wellbeing, our growth in Christian maturity or

¹ There could be grounds for saying that the biblical uses of the terms 'self-control' and 'self-discipline' have slightly different meanings in their various contexts. However, throughout this book I have used the expressions more or less interchangeably.

our eternal destiny. It may never occur to some that self-discipline (or self-control) in relation to, say, eating, the use of time, work ethics, habit patterns or spending money, could have the slightest connection with *spiritual* realities or with our relationship with God. Yet the Bible is very specific in what it says about these matters, and it is therefore important that Christians understand what they really believe in regard to self-discipline.

The problem is, with many of us there was very little self-discipline in our lives before we became Christians! As Peter Jeffery points out:

We did things either because we had to do them (for example, going to school or to work), or because we liked doing them (for example, sport or music). In most areas of our lives self-discipline played very little part. But once a person becomes a Christian, that has to change . . . self-discipline does not sound very spiritual; all that matters, surely, is that we should have faith. Faith, of course, is crucial; but you need to realize that without a disciplined life you will stagnate as a Christian.²

It has been said that ‘discipline is what moderns need the most and want the least’.³ The same writer goes on to describe many ‘respectable Christians’ who have developed a ‘lifelong pattern of running away from difficulties, of avoiding incompatible people, of seeking the easy way, of quitting when the going gets rough’. He says that only by

² Peter Jeffery, *Walk Worthy: Guidelines for Those Beginning the Christian Life*, Evangelical Press of Wales, Mid Glamorgan, 1979, p. 55.

³ Richard Shelley Taylor, *The Disciplined Life*, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, 1962, p. 11. Dr Taylor was president of the Nazarene Bible College at Thornleigh NSW in the late 1950s. The Church of the Nazarene teaches a doctrine of ‘entire sanctification’ which can lead them to the view of ‘sinless perfection’. Despite this background to his teaching, many of Taylor’s thoughts on self-discipline are of practical value.

‘consistent disciplined living can that strength of character be developed which can face adversities without fainting’.⁴

Any honest examination of the subject of self-discipline in the light of the Bible will no doubt be painful—and perhaps daunting. Yet it may prove to be a key to spiritual growth which has eluded us for years! One writer has put it this way: ‘There are no “gains without pains” in spiritual things any more than in temporal’.⁵

The word ‘discipline’ includes the idea of instruction and correction. It means training which improves, moulds, strengthens and perfects character. *Self-discipline* or *self-control* implies a life-style in which one’s *own* efforts and motives are all geared towards a deliberate and positive change according to some rule, standard or objective. That’s why to the serious athlete such self-discipline is essential to success and becomes an all-absorbing passion in order to achieve a particular goal. But for the Christian there is a higher motivation and purpose:

Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one (1 Cor. 9:25).

Elisabeth Elliot writes about a Christian attitude towards self-discipline:

Christian discipline means placing oneself under orders. It is no mere business of self-improvement, to be listed along with speed-reading, weight watching, jogging, time management, home repairs, or how to win friends. Such programs have a strong appeal that is largely self-serving: what’s in it for me? Will I

⁴ Taylor, *The Disciplined Life*, pp. 11–12.

⁵ J. C. Ryle, *Practical Religion: Plain Papers on the Duties of Professing Christians*, James Clarke, London, 1959, p. 22.

improve my IQ, my looks, my build, my efficiency, my house, my bank account? Will I be better liked, courted, taken more seriously, promoted? If these are the goals, certainly it helps to pursue them with the encouragement of and in the company of others with the same ambitions. Social pressure goes a long way, but in the end a do-it-yourself program depends on willpower alone, which is not enough for most of us.⁶

The self-discipline of a Christian is undertaken in dependence on the power of God alone with a view to *moral* change and a *spiritual* goal. A believer should see self-discipline as a priority in his life because, as Bishop Ryle put it, 'If there be anything that deserves a struggle in this world, it is the prosperity of the soul'.⁷

The very words 'disciple' and 'discipline' come from the same root. Hence a disciple is one who is disciplined to follow his/her master as an undistracted learner. The *Christian* disciple ought therefore to be an undistracted follower of Christ, and for that reason, self-discipline should characterise the life of every believer. Elisabeth Elliot goes on to say:

The disciple is not on his own, left to seek *self-actualization*, which is a new word for old-fashioned *selfishness*. He is not 'doing his thing' to find his own life or liberty or happiness. He gives himself to a Master and in so doing leaves self behind.⁸

Sadly, most of us would have to confess that this is not always the case! We sense our innate moral weaknesses and are often ashamed of our seeming inability to exercise

⁶ Elisabeth Elliot, *Discipline: The Glad Surrender*, Fleming H. Revell Company, Old Tappan, 1982, p. 24.

⁷ Ryle, *Practical Religion*, p. 23.

⁸ Elliot, *Discipline*, p. 25.

self-control in certain situations of life. For all the wrong reasons 'self' is often very much to the fore! Nevertheless, the principle still stands that the Bible speaks a great deal about discipleship and, as we will see, one of the marks of that discipleship ought to be self-discipline. We will also see in a later chapter that self-control is a fruit of the Spirit and therefore a wonderful gift that comes to us by the grace of God. We will see that we really can't do anything by way of sustained moral integrity without Him.

Of course, I am not saying that a believer who lacks self-discipline is not a genuine disciple of Christ! That would leave most of us out in the cold! Nor am I saying that our salvation is in any way based on our own efforts rather than on faith in Christ alone. Self-discipline must always be seen as a servant, not as our saviour.

One of the pressures we all face as believers is the need to press on with our walk of faith and obedience as disciples of Christ even when the going is difficult or our tasks and responsibilities border on the monotonous. One writer has commented on the fact that in the Old Testament the word for 'valley' can be translated as a 'difficult place' or as a 'monotonous place'. He says:

The difficult place offers the Christian the thrill of trusting Christ in adverse circumstances, and the possibility of victory in a well-pitched battle. The monotonous place brings no excitement. It has no appearance of conflict, and in it we tend to be indifferent to the presence of the enemy. In his journey through life the Christian will find himself more frequently passing through this kind of country than through any other.⁹

⁹ H. W. Cragg, *The Conqueror's Way: The Experience of Victory in Christ*, The Inter-Varsity Fellowship, London, 1948, p. 63.

It is the disciplined person who is more likely to weather these ‘monotonous’ times. It is the disciplined person who will be enabled to press on under such circumstances. In other words, it is the disciplined person who is equipped to enter more fully into all that Christian discipleship means. For example, a disciplined person works while others waste time; a disciplined person prays while others sleep; a disciplined person takes on the unpleasant tasks which others tend to avoid because they evoke no applause. A disciplined person, on seeing the issues of life as they really are, sets out deliberately to live accordingly. A disciplined person is sensitive and open to the promptings and direction of God’s Spirit and word—and *responds in obedience*. It is the disciplined person who genuinely grows spiritually and matures in faith. It is the disciplined person whom God uses to change the world. Such disciplined men and women are the instruments by whom he touches and changes the lives of others for their good so that they are never the same again. In this regard Dr D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes:

I defy you to read the life of any saint that has ever adorned the life of the church without seeing at once that the greatest characteristic in the life of that saint was discipline and order. Invariably it is the universal characteristic of all the outstanding men and women of God. Read about Henry Martyn, David Brainerd, Jonathan Edwards, the brothers Wesley, and Whitefield—read their journals. It does not matter what branch of the church they belonged to, they have all disciplined their lives and have insisted upon the need for this; and obviously it is something that is thoroughly scriptural and absolutely essential.¹⁰

It is the disciplined person who truly knows joy, peace and a sense of fulfilment in life. For example, as Peter Jeffery points out:

There is no aspect of our spiritual life that will not benefit greatly by daily self-discipline . . . Discipline does not take all the joy, spontaneity and excitement out of the Christian life. On the contrary, because it deepens our relationship with God, it adds to our joy, spontaneity and sense of expectancy.¹¹

On the other hand, the undisciplined person is always looking for ways to avoid the hard grind of solid work, and instead, will seek to arrive at a given goal by whatever ‘short cuts’ can be found!

For the Christian, effort, self-discipline, self-control and self-exertion are not options. They are fundamental necessities because they flow out of our need to be consistently obedient. In a very real sense the goal of holiness and the need for self-discipline in the life of a Christian is essentially a matter of obedience to the will of God:

We may not openly assert that we do not intend to obey God, but we spend a good deal of our time explaining away commandments which cut across our own desires, or arguing about doubtful things when we ought to be facing squarely the issue of sin in our lives.¹²

We must come to see that it is impossible for us to be the persons God wants us to be, or to do the things God wants us to do, unless we live obedient, disciplined, ordered lives. Concerning the verse: ‘Strive to enter in at the strait [narrow] gate’ (Luke 13:24, *AV*), Bishop Ryle once wrote:

¹⁰ Dr D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, quoted by Jeffery, *Walk Worthy*, p. 55.

¹¹ Jeffery, *Walk Worthy*, pp. 56–7.

¹² H. W. Cragg, *The Conqueror’s Way*, p. 53.

Running the Race

‘STRIVE’ teaches that laziness in religion is a great sin . . . It is a breach of a plain commandment . . . And what shall be said of the man who neglects his soul, and makes no effort to enter the strait gate? There can be only one reply. He is omitting a positive duty. Christ says to him, ‘Strive,’ and behold, he sits still!¹³

Christians who think they can get by without any effort and without any serious, consistent self-discipline are kidding themselves. Their brand of Christianity will be a gutless, superficial, useless one, which ultimately dishonours God and turns others away from the truth. It will be a life-style marked by vacillations, hypocrisy and, perhaps in the end, disillusionment. They have forgotten that they are in a very real spiritual battle every day with a formidable enemy who is out to do them in:

Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour (1 Pet. 5:8).

Having said all this, I have to admit that even though I may be very disciplined in certain areas of my life, in others, I seem to fail miserably. Never a day passes when I do not want to be holy, and yet, I regularly experience mortifying defeat! I have no trouble identifying with the hymn writer:

I know that sin and guilt combine
To reign o'er every thought of mine,
And turn from good to ill;
I know that when I try to be
Upright, and just, and true to Thee,
I am a sinner still!

Self Control! What For?

I know that often when I strive
To keep a spark of love alive
For Thee, the powers within
Leap up in unsubmissive might,
And oft benumb my sense of right,
And draw me back to sin.¹⁴

In spite of these constant setbacks I trust I am still learning daily to press on. I refuse to be put off! God helping me, I will not cease to make the effort to be disciplined in every department of my life. And I urge you to do the same. Of course, I recognise that some people—who are naturally conscientious and determined—are far more likely to succeed in exercising self-control than I ever will. However, irrespective of our individual capacity, drive, make up or temperament, we all need to look at what the Scriptures are saying in order to learn how we might be better equipped to move forward in our growth and maturity as disciples of Christ. In all this, I have to keep reminding myself—as I do you—that it is still God's gracious work in us by his Spirit. Without him we can achieve nothing. But he desires and has planned for our entire participation in what the Holy Spirit is doing in us and through us each day.

In John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* there is the wonderful story of Christian visiting Interpreter's house. Bunyan writes:

Then I saw in my dream that the Interpreter took Christian by the hand, and led him into a place where was a fire burning against a wall, and one standing by it, always casting much water upon it to quench it; yet did the fire burn higher and hotter.

Then said Christian, What means this?

¹³ Ryle, *Practical Religion*, p. 23.

¹⁴ Frank B. St. John, *New Creation Hymn Book*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1990, no. 218.

The Interpreter answered, This fire is the work of grace that is wrought in the heart; he that casts water upon it, to extinguish and put it out, is the devil: but, in that thou seest the fire, notwithstanding, burn higher and hotter, thou shalt also see the reason of that. So he had him about to the back side of the wall, where he saw a man with a vessel of oil in his hand, of which he did also continually cast, but secretly, into the fire.

Then said Christian, What means this?

The Interpreter answered, This is Christ, who continually with the oil of his grace maintains the work already begun in the heart; by the means of which, notwithstanding what the devil can do, the souls of his people prove gracious still. And in that thou sawest that the man stood behind the wall to maintain the fire; this is to teach thee that it is hard for the tempted to see how this work of grace is maintained in the soul.¹⁵

The fire of God's grace is constantly burning in the hearts of those who have come to faith in Christ. Unless he maintains that work we cannot survive. It is by our participation through faith and obedience in what he is doing that our assurance grows and his work in the world is furthered.

Why then should we be self-disciplined? What is the pressing necessity for self-control? It is because God is at work in us to bring about his ultimate purpose—our glorification and the establishment of a holy people who will be like his Son. Of course, if we are foolish enough to choose *not* to be self-disciplined, then it is certain that God will take action and bring *his* discipline to bear in our lives.

When the Israelites were about to enter the promised land of Canaan, God spoke to them through Moses,

¹⁵ John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, Cassell, Petter, and Galpin, London, n.d., pp. 41–2.

reminding them of the salvation they had experienced in their deliverance from Egypt. He rehearsed how he had led them through the wilderness for forty years, providing for them, sustaining them and keeping them from their enemies. But in spite of God's patience and extraordinary goodness towards them, they were rebellious and disobedient. They would not keep their eye on the goal. They kept looking back every time the way ahead got hard or uncomfortable. They did not value the salvation that had been granted them and the perspective of where they were headed kept going out of focus. As a result they had to come under the discipline of the Lord himself—as Moses reminded them:

He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the LORD your God disciplines you. Therefore keep the commandments of the LORD your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him (Deut. 8:3–6).

Our Lord loves us so much that he is not going to allow us to turn back to our 'Egypt'—whatever that may mean for each of us. The point is, he will discipline us if we will not discipline ourselves. He will bring into our lives those events and circumstance that will force us back onto the path and back into obedience. Those experiences may not be very pleasant, and it would be far better if we took seriously the responsibility to be self-controlled and self-disciplined without having to wait for the Lord to do it!

The writer of Hebrews says as much when he quotes from the same passage in Deuteronomy 8:

And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children—‘My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by him; for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts’. Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness. Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (Heb. 12:5–11).

I urge you to take seriously the need to be self-disciplined in your daily walk as a believer. It is God’s intention to complete the work that he has begun in each of us. The outcome is holiness. The goal is likeness to Christ. The final chapter will see a vast family of blood-bought sons and daughters reflecting the character of their Father. That means we must never lose sight of who is sustaining us each day! May we never lose sight of the fact that we are his product—his workmanship (Eph. 2:10)—and that as his grace continues to supply all our needs, so we outwork those blessings by living accordingly—as disciplined men and women whose conduct daily commends the Gospel of Christ in a fallen world.

2

The Goal Is Holiness

We know from the Bible that it is God’s will for Christians to live godly lives. He desires that we live in a way that is Christlike—reflecting his character and bringing honour to him. To this end God has given us the wonderful gift of his *Holy* Spirit, and he expects us to be aiming towards holy living each day:

Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication . . . For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness. Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God, who also gives his Holy Spirit to you (1 Thess. 4:1–3, 7–8).

The Bible is very explicit in telling us just how holiness, godliness and Christlikeness are to be cultivated in the Christian life. Of course, it *is* primarily the work of the Holy Spirit. However, it is not an activity done ‘over the top of us’ or independently of our direct and deliberate participation. The will is deeply involved, and therefore *self*-discipline and *self*-control are fundamental to our spiritual growth.

Paul tells young Timothy that he must discipline himself *towards* godliness: ‘Train yourself in godliness’ (1 Tim. 4:7). He urges Timothy to be self-oriented *towards* godly living. Clearly, godliness does not just happen in the life of a Christian. God does not come and ‘zap’ us the moment we are converted. It is not automatic, nor does it come about by some sort of natural progression.

Godliness comes in the Christian life first and foremost as a result of our new relationship with the Father through Christ and his forgiveness. We are accounted holy and righteous by God because of the death and resurrection of his Son. As we have come to faith in Christ, so we have been united to him. We have come to participate in his holiness. We share his righteousness. We are declared to be all that he is in the eyes of the Father. We are ‘in Christ’.

But day-to-day holy living is another matter. It is to flow out of what we already are in Christ, and, among other things, comes in conjunction with self-discipline. Day-to-day godliness comes as a result of being obedient. Godliness comes as we exercise our wills to *do* and to *be* what God instructs us to do and be, now that we belong to him and are in Christ. Godliness results from consistent effort and perseverance and endurance. In other words, it is the result of persistent self-discipline, according to the promises, exhortations and teaching of Scripture. This is not to say that disciplined living is to be *equated* with holy living. It would be a gross error to think that discipline could ever be a *substitute* for holiness. The fact is, it’s possible for a person to be very disciplined but without having God or holiness as their object. Paul instructed Timothy to be disciplined, specifically with a view to godliness. So, then, self-discipline is but one of the many

important and valuable tools by which God enables us to grow in maturity and become more and more like Christ.

The famous 19th century preacher Charles Spurgeon once said:

A neighbor near my study persists in practicing on the flute. He bores my ears as with an auger and renders it almost an impossibility to think. Up and down his scales he runs remorselessly, until even the calamity of temporary deafness would almost be welcome to me. Yet he teaches me that I must practice if I would be perfect, must exercise myself unto godliness if I would be skilful, must, in fact, make myself familiar with the word of God, with holy living, and saintly dying. Such practice, moreover, will be as charming as my neighbor’s flute is intolerable.¹

Being godly, or holy, or like Christ, is not an option. We are *commanded* to be holy. Because God is holy, and because we now belong to him and represent him in a hostile world, we are to reflect his character in all we do and say and think. We are to be single-minded, with only one goal in view—*holiness!*

Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’ (1 Pet. 1:13-16).

Do you see the imperatives in this passage? ‘Prepare your minds’, ‘discipline yourselves’, ‘set all your hope on’, ‘be obedient’, ‘do not be conformed’, ‘be holy’. This same sense of urgency for holiness is seen in this verse from Hebrews:

¹ Charles Spurgeon, *The Quotable Spurgeon*, Harold Shaw Publishers, Wheaton, 1990, p. 260.

Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14).

In speaking about our need for self-discipline and the goal of godliness in the life of the Christian, Dr Jay Adams states:

One's whole life ought to be disciplined (i.e., structured, set up, organized, and running day by day) toward the goal of godliness. Everything that happens should be used to contribute something toward reaching that goal.²

Let's face it, left to ourselves this is an impossible goal! But as we will see, it is only in the light of God's grace, his forgiveness and the work of the Holy Spirit that any sustained discipline is possible in the life of the Christian. Jay Adams himself says:

All of the stress that the Bible puts upon 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, as I said. Rather, it is through the power of the Holy Spirit alone that one can so endure.³

Jerry Bridges makes the same point:

If we are to make any progress in the pursuit of holiness, we must assume our responsibility to discipline or train ourselves. But we are to do all this in total dependence on the Holy Spirit to work in us and strengthen us with the strength that is in Christ.⁴

What is obvious is that this self-discipline means hard work! It means sustained daily effort. It means maintaining

² Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, Nutley, 1973, pp. 209–10.

³ Jay E. Adams, *Godliness through Discipline*, P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, 1972, p. 19.

⁴ Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace*, NavPress Publishing Group, Colorado Springs, 1994, p. 134.

our priorities. As Dr Adams points out, the Greek word for 'train' used by Paul in 1 Timothy 4:7 (quoted above) is that from which we get our English word 'gymnasium'. It conveys the picture of athletes training hard! The same word is used in 2 Peter 2:14 where it speaks of some people whose 'hearts are *trained* in greed'. Thus discipline—or the lack of it—results in life-patterns being formed. Habits develop depending on how we respond to the demands and responsibilities of life. These habit-patterns can be good or bad, worthy or unworthy, healthy or unhealthy, godly or ungodly. In this context, William James's proverb takes on a new light:

Sow a thought, and you reap an action,
Sow an action, and you reap a habit,
Sow a habit, and you reap a character,
Sow a character, and you reap a destiny.⁵

It is only the self-disciplined person who sows that which is godly, pure and honouring to God and his word. It is the self-disciplined believer who will not allow bad thoughts to lead to bad actions, habits and character. It is the self-disciplined Christian who sows holy thoughts that lead to holy actions and holy habits and a holy character. And, as we saw from Hebrews 12:14 above, it is the holy person who attains eternal life.

We must face the fact that because we are *fallen* human beings our natural bias is always towards sin. Left to ourselves, *sin is always our default mode!* It is always away from God. It is always towards ungodliness. Of ourselves, we have no resources with which to combat the world, the flesh and the devil. On our own we will always lose out in

⁵ Quoted in a sermon by Geoffrey Bingham, Thornleigh, 1962. William James was a psychologist who lived early last century.

the end. We are, in fact, in a huge battle—whether we realise it or not! Bishop Ryle wrote:

The true Christian is called to be a soldier, and must behave as such from the day of his conversion to the day of his death. He is not meant to live a life of religious ease, indolence, and security. He must never imagine for a moment that he can sleep and doze along the way to heaven, like one travelling in an easy carriage. If he takes his standard of Christianity from the children of this world, he may be content with such notions; but he will find no countenance for them in the Word of God. If the Bible is the rule of his faith and practice, he will find his course laid down very plainly in this matter. He must 'fight' . . . The principal fight of the Christian is with the world, the flesh, and the devil. These are his never-dying foes . . . 'In time of war it is the worst mistake to underrate your enemy, and try to make a little war.' This Christian warfare is no light matter.⁶

In view of this very real battle in which we are engaged, self-discipline in the life of the Christian is not just some 'optional extra' for those who want it but which is not necessary for all: *it is a dire urgency for every believer*. Our battles against sin and Satan are in the arena of a fallen world. They are fought in the context of a world that is not morally neutral, and the backdrop to all our best efforts is the constant down-drag of our corrupt nature. We are incessantly being opposed by Satan, the world and the flesh. In all this we must recognise our own terrible, innate moral weakness. Unless we see how impotent we are, we will always be in danger of being overcome by these forces. Unless we see how utterly dependent we are on the resources God gives, we are likely to cave in and become discouraged and disillusioned. We are no match for these

manipulating powers and can only press on by means of the energising strength which God himself constantly works in and through us:

I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:6).

It is God who brought us into salvation in the first place, and he is going to sustain that gracious work in us right up until the moment Christ comes again. He began the process in us and he will complete it! But does that mean we have no part to play? Do we have no responsibility in the work he is doing in us? Do we just sit back and enjoy the free gift of salvation without being expected to have some participation in the process? Not so, according to Paul's words to the Philippians:

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil. 2:12–13).

When we came to faith in Christ we obeyed God's command to repent and believe—for to believe and to obey are one and the same in the New Testament. Thus Paul urges the believers to *go on* obeying just as they did at the start. But they ought to do so with 'fear and trembling' precisely because it is God who is at work in them to bring their salvation to its final conclusion. That means we all ought to be constantly working hard to make sure our salvation is lived out in a way that honours this great God who is working in us by his power. Our 'willing' and 'working' are to be in step with *his* willing and working in us.

⁶ J. C. Ryle, *Holiness*, James Clarke, London, 1956, pp. 52–4.

The trouble is, left to ourselves we are all *naturally* lazy when it comes to moral determination. *Naturally* we are self-willed and self-seeking. *Naturally* we all tend to be self-assertive (even those of us who have a placid temperament and never show such assertiveness on the outside). *Naturally* we are all tempted to self-aggrandisement and self-promotion. The disciple of Christ must go against all these fallen desires. We must go against the tide of all that seems natural around us. We must see things as they really are and respond to God's commands and exhortations as they come to us through the Scriptures:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever (1 John 2:15–17).

True discipleship is therefore self-denying. It is not the denying ourselves *of* something, but of what we *are* of ourselves as fallen creatures. It is a denying that puts to death, cuts off, mortifies that which rises up within us of our old Adamic self-assertiveness and independence. It is repudiating that which the ordinary person will say is our 'right'. It is renouncing that which our fallen nature still prompts us to desire but which happens to be contrary to the truth. Thus Jesus said:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it (Luke 9:23–24).

Dr Jay Adams remarks:

Taking up the cross doesn't mean carrying some heavy burden. It is not enduring a trial ('I guess my cross is that I must live the

rest of my life with my wife'). No, that isn't what is in view at all. Taking up the cross means going to the place of death. It means putting to death the old life patterns of the old man.⁷

In the eighteenth century a group of young men at Oxford University formed what came to be called 'The Holy Club'. They were students who wanted desperately to know Christ and his salvation, and therefore made it their aim to be disciplined in all they did. When George Whitefield joined Oxford he was deeply impressed by this small but despised group. He wrote at the time—when he was just eighteen:

Never did persons, I believe, strive more earnestly to enter in at the strait [narrow] gate. They kept their bodies under [disciplined] even to an extreme. They were dead to the world, and willing to be accounted as the dung and offscouring of all things, so that they might win Christ. Their hearts glowed with the love of God, and they never prospered so much in the inward man, as when they had all manner of evil spoken against them falsely without.⁸

Whitefield was greatly stirred by these maligned 'Methodists'—the title given to them by the other students because they lived by such 'rule and method'. He wrote: 'I now began, like them, to live by rule, and to pick up the very fragments of my time, that not a moment of it might be lost'.⁹ Whitefield was not converted at that stage but it was not long after that he came to a personal faith in Christ and his extraordinary and powerful preaching ministry began. That he was one of the world's greatest Christian evangelists is well-known, but it is not so well known that his remarkable life of discipline began when he was in his

⁷ Adams, *Godliness through Discipline*, p. 8.

⁸ George Whitefield, *George Whitefield's Journals*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1960, p. 48.

⁹ Whitefield, *George Whitefield's Journals*, p. 47.

teens. The habit patterns developed in Oxford not only stayed with him for the remainder of his days but also accounted in part for why he was such a great man.

Self-discipline is seen to be basic to such commands as Paul gives in Romans where he talks about the believer having to go against the stirrings of indwelling sin:

Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness (Rom. 6:12–13).

All Christians know from painful experience the daily battle with indwelling sin. We want to do and be that which is right in God's sight, but nevertheless find a humiliating inability to accomplish those desires! In spite of our best intentions and efforts we often experience nothing but agonising failure! This is the tension Paul talks about in Romans 7 (which will be discussed in more detail later in chapter 8):

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it (Rom. 7:15–18).

But because the Christian is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and because Christ has taken the guilt and penalty of sin, we *can* say no to sin. We *can* resist temptation *if we will*:

No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it (1 Cor. 10:13).

Nothing can be more clear from these and other related passages that God has made provision for us to walk in holiness of life if we will but trust the means he has provided—the indwelling Holy Spirit:

... for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live (Rom. 8:13).

These passages all call for holiness of life, watchfulness and consistent living in obedience to Christ as Lord—in the power of the Spirit. It means consistent self-discipline in all things—and *it can be done!* God does not make these promises to tantalise or mock us. He does not play games with us. On the other hand, he *does* make provision for us to exercise our wills and so to grow. Hence discipleship which does not issue out of a genuine, grace-motivated, Spirit-controlled discipline is not real. It is a counterfeit, make-believe discipleship that bears no relation to that which the New Testament teaches as the norm for every believer.

If any comparisons are to be made between our own discipleship standards and that of another, then plainly, Christ himself is the only one against whom we should measure ourselves:

A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher (Luke 6:40).

The disciple *of* Christ should be *like* Christ. That doesn't just happen. Deliberate discipline under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit is the indispensable key to that likeness being cultivated.

We have already seen that it is God's will and intention that we be holy and that we be like Christ. We have seen

that he expects us to be disciplining ourselves to that end. If we fail to do so, and if, out of some rebellious attitude, we go against his word and against what we see to be his purpose for us, then *he* will discipline us! We will come under his chastening hand. As was the experience of the Psalmist of old, the Lord will bring his discipline to bear upon us, not as judgment, but for correction:

The LORD has punished [chastened, disciplined] me severely, but he did not give me over to death (Ps. 118:18).

God will lovingly bring into our lives such circumstances and events that will cause us to seek his face and desire relief born out of true repentance. Sometimes these are hard lessons to learn. Charles Spurgeon said:

God's people can never by any possibility be punished for their sin. God has punished them already in the person of Christ, their substitute. But yet, while the Christian cannot be condemned, he can be chastised. Punishment is laid on a man in anger; God strikes him in wrath. But when he afflicts his child, chastisement is applied in love. The rod has been baptized in deep affection before it is laid on the believer's back.¹⁰

Perhaps you have failed in some area of your life but have done nothing about it. You have made no effort to amend your ways or change your lifestyle. Do you realise that you are suppressing the truth and inviting God's chastening? You will incur the Father's displeasure. When any of us foolishly go down this path he does not leave us be, but will lovingly seek to draw us back by disciplining us:

¹⁰ Charles H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon at His Best*, compiled by Tom Carter, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1988, p. 58.

And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children—'My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by him; *for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves*, and chastises every child whom he accepts.' Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order *that we may share his holiness*. Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness *to those who have been trained by it* (Heb. 12:5–11).

God is making us to be sons like *his Son*. He is conforming us to the image of Christ, and we can very soon see what we should be like by looking at the life of Jesus. Our obedience and self-discipline is with a view to eternity. We should have the long-term view in sight. What we are here and now has a huge bearing in determining what we *shall* be:

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire (1 Cor. 3:10–15).

In this passage Paul is warning other teachers and preachers to take care how they built on the foundation which he has laid in the church at Corinth. Christ is the basis on which all else is to be constructed and so others will either build with truth or with error. Some could build with 'wood, hay, straw' instead of with 'gold, silver, precious stones'. In the end, the fire of the day of judgment will test out what sort of 'building' these teachers have constructed on the initial foundation of Christ.

From this we may draw the implication that each Christian is 'building' a life of one sort or another on the foundation of Christ. The question is, with what 'material' will we build on that foundation? Either we will build a life that has substance (gold, silver, precious stones) or we will build with material that will not survive (wood, hay, straw). At the end, our 'work'—our life, our character—will be tested by the fire of God's judgment. The foundation—Jesus Christ—will still be there because we can never lose our salvation. But what of our works, our conduct, our behaviour during our life as a believer? *Will that survive the test?*

Some Christians will have been disciplined and obedient and there will be much to show for it on the last day. Others will have not cared to make the effort to be obedient and faithful and there will be little or nothing to show for it. They will get into heaven by the skin of their teeth—so to speak! For the former there will be rewards, but for the latter, loss. This passage tells us that we need to be seriously disciplined now that we have become Christians—for what we *will receive* in heaven will largely depend on what we *have been* here and now.

I recall reading somewhere years ago about a person who asked George Whitefield if he expected to see John

Wesley in heaven. The reply from Whitefield was instant, 'No, I don't expect to see Mr Wesley in heaven. He will be so far up the front that I won't be able to see him!'

Remember, none of this has anything to do with our salvation, but everything to do with the degree of glory we will bring to our Father when we enter Paradise. The point is, our discipline in life here and now has *eternal* consequences.

Bishop Ryle, writing in the 19th century, urged his readers to seek salvation and the welfare of their souls. But his words are equally applicable to the believer and the need for us to be constantly pressing on towards the goal of the high calling we have in Christ:

If you have been taught to 'strive' for your soul's prosperity, I entreat you never to suppose you can go too far. Never give way to the idea that you are taking too much trouble about your spiritual condition, and that there is no need for so much carefulness. Settle it rather in your mind that 'in all labour there is profit,' and that no labour is so profitable as that bestowed on the soul. It is a maxim among good farmers that the more they do for the land the more the land does for them. I am sure it should be a maxim among Christians that the more they do for their religion the more their religion will do for them. Watch against the slightest inclination to be careless about any means of grace. Beware of shortening your prayers, your Bible reading, your private communion with God. Take heed that you do not give way to a thoughtless, lazy manner of using the public services of God's house. Fight against any rising disposition to be sleepy, critical, and fault-finding, while you listen to the preaching of the Gospel. Whatever you do for God, do it with all your heart and mind and strength. In other things be moderate, and dread running into extremes. In soul matters fear moderation just as you would fear the plague. Care not what men think of you. Let it be enough for you that your Master says, 'STRIVE'.¹¹

¹¹ Ryle, *Practical Religion*, p. 26.

3

Discipline in the Life of Christ

It is impossible to read the Gospels and not recognise that the life of Jesus was marked by consistent obedience to the Father. His obedience was with the view to doing his Father's will—that is, doing the works the Father had sent him to do. It was an obedience which he knew would lead him to that fateful hour in history which would culminate in his death on a criminal's cross:

Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work' (John 4:34).

But Jesus answered them, 'My Father is still working, and I also am working' (John 5:17).

Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished' (John 5:19–20).

[Jesus said] I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me (John 5:30).

These passages show clearly that Jesus set his will firmly to do his Father's will and to accomplish the work that he had given him to do. In all this he had no power or authority of his own, but it was the Father working, empowering, accomplishing and doing the work in and through his Son:

I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me (John 6:38).

So Jesus said, 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him' (John 8:28–29).

We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work (John 9:4).

I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak (John 12:49).

Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works (John 14:10).

[Father] I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do (John 17:4).

Strange as it may seem, Jesus had to *learn* what his Father's will was in order to do it. He needed to be taught. He had to exercise obedience and faith. He had to walk in the fullness of the Spirit in utter dependence upon the Father for the necessary strength and power. He had to learn to be a true Son of the Father. In other words, it was not automatic! For this reason, we can say that Jesus was the most self-disciplined person in all history:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered (Heb. 5:7–8).

Christ's self-discipline flowed out of his intention to always do the Father's will. It was not just that he was disciplined as such—but his discipline was the result of his faith-obedience. He *learned* obedience.

Jesus was disciplined in his prayer life as much as in anything else he did. In the midst of his short but busy life of ministry he rose early in order to be alone with his Father in prayer:

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed (Mark 1:35).

Nor did ministry have priority over his need to be in prayer, and many times he withdrew from the crowds in order to attend to the necessity of communion with his Father:

Now when Jesus heard this [the death of John the Baptist], he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself (Matt. 14:13).

And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone (Matt. 14:23).

But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray (Luke 5:15–16).

Remember, Jesus was a *man*. He lived as we live. He suffered as we suffer. He was tempted in every respect as we are tempted—yet without sinning. His temptations were far

greater than anything we experience because he resisted them totally. In other words, he never yielded to any! That fact alone should indicate to us the level of his self-discipline, obedience and faith. We often make the mistake of saying: 'Ah, but he was the Son of God. He was divine. He was different to us. He was not like us. He didn't have the problems we have with sin.'

I know it's not possible for us to fully understand the incarnation—the eternal Son of God becoming Man—and we cannot comprehend how deity and humanity can be there together in the one person of Jesus Christ. What we do know from the Scriptures is that all Jesus did on earth he did as a *man*—as *the* Man, the second Adam. Peter declared on the day of Pentecost:

You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a *man* attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know—this *man*, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law (Acts 2:22–23).

Paul tells us that the Son set aside, or emptied himself of, the prerogatives and powers of his deity when he came to be a man. This does not mean he ceased in any way to be the possessor of the divine nature, but rather that he refused to grasp at his existence as one equal to God. Instead, he chose to be obedient as a man. Again, we can never fully understand all that this means:

[Jesus] who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross (Phil. 2:6–8).

We must keep reminding ourselves that everything Jesus did, he did as a man. He had to exercise faith—just as we must. He had to learn to obey—just as we must. He had to rely on the Holy Spirit—just as we must. He had to resist temptation—just as we must. He had to trust God implicitly—just as we have to. He had to be consistently disciplined—just as we should. Thus we see from Matthew 4 that when Satan tempted Jesus, he did so on fundamental issues—just as he does with us. He set out to tempt Christ to deviate from his duty to be a true Son and from his determination to accomplish his Father’s will:

The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ But he answered, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”’ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you,” and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”’ Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”’ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me’. Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”’ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him (Matt. 4:3–11).

Satan tempted and attacked him in order to divert him from the path of obedience—and he does exactly the same with us. At the heart of Satan’s temptation was his desire to deflect Christ from going to the Cross. He tempted him by misquoting Scripture, and if Jesus had not known the word of God thoroughly, he could have been thrown off-course.

However, Jesus was not diverted because he knew God’s word and *chose* to obey. His will was set to do his Father’s bidding. Thus we see him disciplined in prayer, disciplined in ministry, disciplined in his relationships, disciplined in the face of suffering, disciplined when tempted, disciplined in the face of death and disciplined in the face of the humanly un-faceable.

Luke 2:49–52 tells us that when aged twelve, Jesus was already shaping his life in obedience. When his parents temporarily lost him in Jerusalem, he was found in the temple asking questions of the religious teachers. To his parents he said: ‘Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?’ Luke goes on to tell us that he was obedient to his parents and ‘increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor’.

From the time of his baptism right through to his death, Jesus moved forward in consistent obedience. He knew he was headed towards an appointed hour—his death. He referred to it many times—as can be seen from these passages from John’s Gospel:

And Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come’ (John 2:4).

Jesus said to them, ‘My time has not yet come, but your time is always here . . . Go to the festival yourselves. I am not going to this festival, for my time has not yet fully come’ (John 7:6, 8).

He spoke these words while he was teaching in the treasury of the temple, but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come (John 8:20).

Running the Race

Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified . . . Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour' (John 12:23, 27).

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end (John 13:1).

Once Jerusalem and his impending death were in sight he made straight for the Cross:

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised (Matt. 16:21).

See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death (Matt. 20:18).

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51).

Jesus did not face 'that hour' without monumental struggles. We see this from the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane:

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.' He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.' And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.' Then he came to the

Discipline in the Life of Christ

disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, 'So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.' Again he went away for the second time and prayed, 'My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.' Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand' (Matt 26:36-46).

It is beyond our comprehension what a temptation it was for Jesus Christ, *the man*, to avoid the Cross. Though he knew he had to face it, yet he pleaded with the Father in the desire that there might be some other way. The writer of Hebrews gives us a clue as to the extent of his anguish:

Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Heb. 5:7-9).

Jesus had to *learn* what obedience involved—in his case, suffering to the point of death. This tells us that his walk of faith was not automatic any more than ours is. If his growth to maturity had been automatic then he could never have been able to 'sympathize with our weaknesses' as one who was tested, yet without sin (Heb. 4:15).

When the soldiers came to arrest him in the garden, Jesus willingly gave himself up to them, 'knowing all that

was to happen to him' (John 18:4). When Peter impetuously intervened and cut off the ear of Malchus, the high priest's slave, Jesus calmly restrained him: 'Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?' (John 18:11).

At his trial before Pilate, Jesus did not balk at the accusations levelled against him, nor did he attempt to justify himself or his ministry. When Pilate questioned him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered:

You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice (John 18:37).

If we had been in his place we would probably have wanted to do a miracle or two to prove who we were! We would have been tempted to counter the false and unjust trial by making some attempt to set the record straight. But Jesus was so sure of what lay ahead and so certain of his destiny and therefore so disciplined in maintaining his course, that we marvel at his restraint:

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth (Isa. 53:7).

On the cross he was not only in extreme physical agony, but the sin and guilt of the whole of humanity was upon him. He was suffering as no other person has ever suffered, because the whole weight of humanity's evil was pressing down upon him. He became what we are as fallen beings, and every evil and sin that men and women have ever committed down through history was now upon him:

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:4–6).

How can we ever take in what it cost the Son of God, who was the Son of Man, to suffer in our place on that cross? Everything in him—*as a man*—would have screamed to be out of there and to avoid that terrible event. But he was obedient even to death.

Thus throughout his life and right up to his death, Jesus was a disciplined man of faith. For this reason, the life of Christ is a superb basis for us to see not only *how* we should be disciplined, but also *why* we should be disciplined. We are to be sons and daughters of the Father, *doing* the works that he has given us to do—*just like the Son*:

As you [Father] have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world (John 17:18).

For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life (Eph. 2:10).

We have been delivered from sin and guilt and condemnation in order to serve our Father and in order that we might do his work. The service we are to render, the fruit we are to bear, the good works we are to accomplish, are those which the Father does through us as we abide in him—just as he did in the life of Jesus:

- The Father is seen to be at work when we do *his* work—just as he was in the works of Jesus.
- The Father is glorified when we do *his* work—just as he was in the works of Jesus.
- We are witnesses to him when we do *his* work—just as Jesus was throughout his life.
- God’s rule and reign are made more evident to the world as we do *his* work—just as it was through Jesus.
- We are true sons and daughters of the Father as we do *his* work—just as the unique Son was.
- Nations are discipled as he commanded, when we do *his* work—just as they were through the ministry of Jesus.
- The power of God’s kingdom is seen in action as we do *his* work—just as it was in the life of Jesus.
- We hasten the coming of the King as we do *his* work—just as it was when Jesus was here.

In order to do his work, we must be given over entirely to do his will. This is impossible unless we are disciplined to do so. Jesus’ intention to do the will of the Father was contested at every point. The choices he made by the exercise of his will were always under threat from the enemy, and ours will be also. In fact, everything is against us. Nevertheless, as we shall see, God has given us his Holy Spirit so that we *can* do his will—*if we will!*

4

The Discipline of Grace

As we have already seen, we ought to be self-disciplined so that we might serve the Father. We are to be obedient in order that we might be holy. We are to be training ourselves for godliness. We are to be shaping our lives so that they will reflect God’s character to a fallen and lost world. In the life of Jesus we have a perfect example of such disciplined, obedient, godly living. But his example—wonderful and helpful though it is—is not enough. In fact, it could be downright discouraging! Right motivation does not issue out of example alone—however good that may be.

For the Christian, self-control and self-discipline in one’s life must be grace-motivated and Spirit-empowered. If not, it will be no more than cold, self-justifying, legalistic duty, driven along by a desire to achieve or arrive at a goal by one’s own efforts. It may even be characterised by a spirit of asceticism,¹ or stoicism,² or at its worst, have

¹ An ascetic is one who practices strict self denial and abstains from worldly comforts and pleasures.

² Stoics were Greeks who held that virtue and happiness could only be obtained by submission to destiny and the natural law. The important thing in life was to remain unmoved by external affairs, and to concentrate on the attitudes and character that are within one’s control. If I cannot control circumstances then I must control the way I look at such circumstances. Stoics laid great emphasis on moral exhortations and were close to Christian teaching in some respects. In early church history, where morality had been sought apart from religion, Stoicism had gained great ground. Some Christians today are more stoical than biblical in their thinking about daily living.

elements of masochism³ to it. All these are forms of false discipline. Legalism is deadly. It can thrust a person on relentlessly so that what should just be responsible living becomes a terrible chore. Or it can have the opposite effect, and produce a dreadful paralysis. Either way, the individual will be living in a harsh, punishing way that has no real joy or personal satisfaction to it. The trouble is, we often still see God as demanding and severe. We have a cloud still hanging over our heads as if he is about to descend on us with some damning criticism for not measuring up to the mark! Charles Swindol writes:

Many (dare I say, most?) Christians live their lives as though they're going to be graded once a year by a God who stands there frowning, with his hands stuck in the pockets of his robe . . . Glaring, He says, 'Well, Johnson, that gets a C—.' And, 'Dorothy, you ought to be ashamed!' And, 'Smith? Not bad. Could've been better, though.' What heretical imaginations we have.

Why do we think like that? Who is responsible for such horror-images of the Almighty? Where did we pick up the idea that God is mad or irritated? Knowing that *all* of God's wrath was poured out on His Son at His death on the cross, how can we think like that? As a matter of fact, the reason He brought Jesus back from the grave is that He is satisfied with His Son. Ponder this: If the Father was satisfied with His Son's full payment for

sin, and we are in His Son, by grace through faith, *then He is satisfied with you and me*. How long must Christians live before we finally believe that? Perhaps our problem is that we will forever have bosses and friends and pastors and parents who will give us lists. There will always be those who will give us more and more and more to live up to. These are the grace killers whether they know it or not. But [by] using guilt trips, shame techniques, and sneaky manipulations, they virtually drive us to distraction! But never God. He's the One who assures us that if we are anything, it is by His marvelous, infinite, matchless grace.⁴

We must constantly recognise that there is no way God can forgive sin *just by forgiving*. A Cross is demanded because a *judgment* of our sin is demanded. That judgment which comes to us because of the Cross is God's greatest act of grace in all history. He has provided the way of escape when we deserved and merited precisely the opposite. That's why the Good News concerning the Cross of Christ could rightly be called 'the Gospel of the grace of God'. It is the marvellous message of God's free action of love toward us to do us good when we deserved nothing but judgment.

According to Psalm 8 we were created glorious beings in God's image. But Paul makes the statement in Romans that we have all 'fallen short' in the matter of reflecting his glorious likeness. We have deliberately denied that glory. Since none are exempt from this self-wrought loss of moral splendour, the only way for us to be rescued and restored is for *God himself to justify and redeem us*. The 'Good News' is that God has indeed done this through his Son Jesus Christ as a grace-gift:

³ Taking pleasure in one's own suffering.

⁴ Charles R. Swindol, *The Grace Awakening*, Word Publishing, Dallas, 1996, pp. 63-4.

... since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; *they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus* (Rom. 3:23–24).

It is imperative we understand that God's forgiveness of our sin (both as a race and as individuals) is nothing less than a gift of his pure grace. It is all of his mercy. It is his love in action. It is never warranted. We never merit it. God's forgiveness only ever comes to us out of his sovereign grace and kindness.

In our arrogance and pride we think we can come to God just when it suits us. We think we can believe in that hour which best satisfies our agenda. But salvation comes to us according to God's mercy and grace and in his exact timing. It has nothing to do with our will, but everything to do with God's sovereign purposes! Charles Spurgeon wrote:

I must confess I never would have been saved if I could have helped it. As long as I could, I rebelled and revolted and struggled against God. When he would have me pray, I would not pray. When he would have me listen to the sound of the ministry, I would not. And when I heard, and the tear rolled down my cheek, I wiped it away and defied him to melt my heart. Then he gave me the effectual blow of grace, and there was no resisting that irresistible effort. It conquered my depraved will and made me bow myself before the sceptre of his grace.

And so it is in every case. Man revolts against his Savior, but where God determines to save, save he will. God never was thwarted yet in any one of his purposes. Man does resist with all his might, but all the might of man, tremendous though it be for sin, is not equal to the majestic might of the Most High.⁵

This gift of forgiveness was lovingly planned by God on our behalf before creation. Before the world began he

⁵ Spurgeon, *Spurgeon at His Best*, p. 89.

graciously purposed to rescue his elect and bring them to a knowledge of himself and to draw them into his family as his blood-bought sons and daughters. There is no question whatever of us having a hand in any of this. It is all of God's initiative:

He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us (Eph. 1:5–8).

Charles Spurgeon again:

I could wish that every time the clock struck, it said, 'By grace are ye saved.' I could wish that there was a trumpet voice ringing out at daybreak both on sea and on land, over the whole round globe the words, 'By grace are ye saved.' The larger portion of mankind do not believe that salvation is by grace. Another part of them profess to believe it, but do not understand its meaning. And many who do understand it have never surrendered to it or embraced it.⁶

It is only grace which relieves us of our deepest of human problems—*guilt towards a holy God*. So long as we are in our guilt we will always be insecure. We will always be exposed and susceptible to idolatry. We will always be wanting to justify ourselves to God, to others and to ourselves. But as the grace of God opens to us and we begin by faith to realise that we have been forgiven through the blood of the Cross, so our guilt with its self-justifying dead works will evaporate. That's because grace not only liberates us from the penalty and pollution of sin, but also from its guilt-driven power.

⁶ Spurgeon, *Spurgeon at His Best*, pp. 339–40.

So, unless God had acted in grace on our behalf at the Cross, there would be no foundation for disciplined faith-living. This means that God's great and glorious grace must become the air we breathe and the sunlight in which we live each moment of the day. Our life of disciplined living is the response of obedient service, not one of seeking somehow to gain merit points with God!

The Puritan John Owen wrote about this twofold relationship between the grace of God and our responsibility to be holy:

Let us consider what regard we ought to have to our own duty and to the grace of God. Some would separate these things as inconsistent. If holiness be our duty, they would say, there is no room for grace; and if it be the result of grace there is no place for duty. But our duty and God's grace are nowhere opposed in the matter of sanctification; for the one absolutely supposes the other. We cannot perform our duty without the grace of God; nor does God give his grace for any other purpose than that we may perform our duty.⁷

For the Christian therefore, right motivation to a disciplined life does not arise just from a sense of duty, but also from seeing how much God has loved us in Christ. On its own, no amount of self-discipline can achieve anything of eternal value, and discipline in itself can never be a substitute for the grace of God. It is faith in the blood of Christ which saves us, not our own efforts. It is faith in what God has done which redeems us, not our own endeavours. It is faith in the power of that event of the Cross that brings us into life, not our own wretched self-righteous-ness.

Motivation to be self-disciplined comes from an awareness that the guilt and penalty of our sin have been entirely removed at the Cross. It comes from a realised experience of God's total forgiveness through Christ which is seen to issue purely from his love and kindness towards us. It is this liberation of the Cross that sets us truly free to be what God wants. Only then do *we* want to be what *he* wants. Only then is *guilt-motivated* action replaced by *grace-motivated* action.

To know that I *must* be disciplined, and yet lack the motivation to do so, is very hard to live with! Hence, there is the necessity of seeing first God's grace and pardon in my total forgiveness and then working out from that. Writing in the 19th century, Horatius Bonar put it this way:

Forgiveness of sins, in believing God's testimony to the finished propitiation of the cross, is not simply indispensable to a holy life, in the way of removing terror and liberating the soul from the pressure of guilt, but of imparting an impulse, and a motive, and a power which nothing else could do. Forgiveness *at the end or in the middle*; a partial forgiveness, or an uncertain forgiveness, or a grudging forgiveness, would be of no avail; it would only tantalize and mock; but a complete forgiveness . . . is a *power* in the earth, a power against self, a power against sin, a power over the flesh, a power for holiness, such as no amount of suspense or terror could create . . . It is forgiveness that sets a man working for God. He does not work in order to be forgiven, but because he has been forgiven; and the consciousness of his sin being pardoned makes him long more for its entire removal than ever he did before.

An unforgiven man cannot work. He has not the will, nor the power, nor the liberty. He is in chains . . . first liberty, then service.⁸

⁷ Quoted by Bridges in, *The Discipline of Grace*, p. 133.

⁸ Horatius Bonar, *God's Way of Holiness*, Moody Press, Chicago, n.d., pp. 52-4.

The Bible is constantly asserting this great principle: first freedom, then obedience. For example: Jesus was confronted one day by a group of self-righteous scribes and Pharisees who had caught a woman allegedly in the act of adultery. He refused to be drawn into their accusations of her and, instead, faced them with their own sin. One by one they backed off and left him alone with the woman. When he asked if any of them had passed judgment on her, she said, 'No one, sir'. To this Jesus replied, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again' (John 8:11). First forgiveness, *then* obedience. First freedom from condemnation, *then* willing service. On another occasion Jesus addressed the Jews who had believed in him, saying:

If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free . . . So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed (John 8:31–32, 36).

In the Book of Galatians, Paul remonstrated with those believers who had been seduced into reverting to their old ways, not fully comprehending the liberty Christ had won for them on the Cross. Paul reminded them that they were free from sin and guilt, so they ought to be living in that freedom!

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery (Gal. 5:1).

Our spiritual liberation from guilt through Christ is the only valid motivation for the Christian to be disciplined and obedient. We will always go on submitting to the 'yoke of slavery' if we do not see how Christ has set us

free from guilt and sin and condemnation. If it were not for God's grace towards us, all our efforts would be nothing but pure works—a seeking somehow to buy him off. But because total forgiveness is a reality, then our obedience is both possible and necessary. It is the obligation of love that should motivate us to be disciplined in heart and mind and body. Jesus told his disciples, 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments' (John 14:15).

We have to keep on being reminded that it is ultimately only the grace of God which enables us to be disciplined. It is his grace which is operating in us to draw us out into holiness of life. Paul makes this clear in this powerful passage from Titus:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, *training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions*, and in the present age to live lives that are *self-controlled*, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds (Titus 2:11–14).

God's grace wonderfully brings us into salvation. We are restored to our full stature, and in that new standing we now desire to serve God and be involved in the vocation that he always had planned for us. Only now can we actually fulfil with dignity and honour the goals which God sets for us. But without that same grace coming to us every moment of every day we are still impotent. Of course, 'grace coming to us' is really *God* coming to us! Geoffrey Bingham notes:

. . . we are not spineless creatures, justified and forgiven but yet always needing grace 'hand-outs' like moral beggars. Rather, God treats us with dignity, requiring us to reach up to our full stature

and maturity . . . For this we need the teaching, instruction, training and educating of grace.⁹

This grace of God ‘trains’ or ‘instructs’ us to be disciplined, self-controlled. The more we understand the emancipation from sin and guilt which has come to us from the hand of God through the death and resurrection of Christ, so the more we are drawn out and enabled to obey him and to be holy in our day-to-day living. Together, God’s grace and love are ultimately the only true foundation for Christian self-control, self-exertion and self-discipline. Geoffrey Bingham goes on:

Grace’s strong instruction, teaching, chastening and constraint causes us to renounce irreligion and worldly passion, to live sober, upright and godly lives, looking for the Saviour who is to appear, meanwhile shaping us up as God’s holy people, and giving us zeal to do good deeds. This is a large programme, but grace is abundant, and its teaching, if sometimes painful, always issues in a good outcome.¹⁰

As we will see in a later chapter, the Spirit of God is at work in us to bring about *his* program in all that we do. Thus it is on the basis of what he is already doing in us and through us that we are to take seriously our need to live sober, self-controlled, disciplined lives. We are to work out (or out-work or live-out) our salvation by careful, godly living, precisely because it is God who is energising (empowering, enabling) us to do his will for his end purposes:

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who

is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil. 2:12–13).

In this passage Paul is speaking primarily to the corporate church in Philippi, rather than just to individuals. But the principle is obviously true for each one of us. He urges us to ‘work out’ that which God has already worked (and continues to work) in us. Our salvation has been entirely the undertaking of God as he has brought us into new life and enabled us to repent and believe. We should be in awe of him for what he has done. But our salvation is a continuing process. We are still on our way—so to speak. It is with that same awe that we press on—in step with that which God is *continuing* to do in our lives. Without him we are lost. Without him we have no hope. Without him constantly energising and empowering us day by day we are dead men and women. No wonder Paul urges us to work out our salvation with ‘fear and trembling’! Geoffrey Bingham comments on this verse: ‘This fear keeps awe alive, and gives no entrance to spiritual pride, complacency or arrogance’.¹¹

It is precisely because God is at work in us that we are enabled (and urged) to live out our salvation day by day. On the basis of what God has done for us in Christ, the New Testament writers often speak in these terms, urging us on to be of a sound mind, vigilant, clear-headed and sober in all our endeavours. That means taking firm control of what we do and say and think! It means *self-discipline!*

. . . for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline (2 Tim. 1:7).

⁹ Geoffrey Bingham, *Great and Glorious Grace*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1988, p. 249.

¹⁰ Bingham, *Great and Glorious Grace*, p. 251.

¹¹ Geoffrey Bingham, *The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians*, NCPI, Blackwood, n.d., p. 30.

Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed (1 Pet. 1:13).

The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers (1 Pet. 4:7).

Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour (1 Pet. 5:8).

As we will see in chapter 9, taking control of our lives and being self-disciplined is never independent of the work of the Holy Spirit within. Not that he just aids us in doing these things; he energises and empowers us totally in order to accomplish the Father's purposes. The fact is, it's an impossible task without him!

5

Disciplined towards Right Goals

It is one thing to be highly motivated, it is quite another to be aiming in the right direction! Thus the Christian needs to have right goals. All the good effort in the world can't make up for having wrong objectives, and it is quite possible for a well-disciplined person to be misguided and so heading the wrong way! For example, the members of some Christian sects are far more disciplined than many mainline Christians—even though we would think they are on the wrong path! It is also a fact that we believers often seem to dissipate our energies in activities that have no real point to them. Often we waste valuable God-given time in pursuits that are not really related to his purposes.

For example, a pastor and his elders might expend a huge amount of time and energy on some grand scheme to bring more people into their church while failing to see the biblical priority of preaching the word! They could become sidetracked into focusing on an 'activity-based' program that aims to attract more people to attend their congregation, while neglecting the one thing that actually changes people's lives—the powerful, prophetic proclamation of the word of God. They want to give the clear impression that

their church is going places because lots of things are happening but, in so doing, they betray a lack of confidence in the power of God's word alone to touch and change lives. As I discussed this with a friend, he noted that 'a building program in a church usually follows revival, or tries to simulate one'. We must take great care to be sure our goals are God's goals.

As individuals, we can be caught up in so-called 'Christian' endeavours which seem to promote the Gospel but which, in the end, may have no eternal value at all. I was involved in a number of Christian organisations not long after my conversion which seemed to have worthy motives and goals. But I eventually discovered that much of what we did and said was no more than a gimmick 'to get people in'. We spent all our time, energy and money on various projects that probably achieved very little in the light of eternity. Looking back, I can see that it was all out of proportion and that many of our goals were misguided and of minimal long-term value. Though I may have learned a lot through those mistakes, I nevertheless wasted much of the time, gifts, energy and money God had entrusted to me in those early years. Since then, I have watched many pastors, youth leaders and other Christians go down the same path. They get enthusiastic about some 'special event' the church is running or some other gimmicky program to attract the unconverted, but which often do little more than mimic the world's way of doing things. What is missing is the uncompromising preaching of the Cross and the claims of Christ on a lost and dying world. That's not so attractive and, I am told, 'might put people off'!

It is essential that we come to the Scriptures and prayerfully discern God's goals for our lives. We will discover many general guidelines that all believers should follow,

but for each of us there will be those special tasks in life which God has purposed for us personally. We must know what God intends us to be and to do, otherwise we will run the risk of setting goals for ourselves that may be way outside his will.

As we saw before, Ephesians 2:8–10 shows us that God's gifts of grace and faith to us are with the view to doing his works which he has planned for us before the world. What are these works? Surely, they are the same as those which God himself is doing! He is about the business of bringing the nations into the obedience of faith. So too should we be. He is on mission and so too should we be. We need to marshal all our resources and be disciplining ourselves towards his goals for us. This means we must have the long-term view of these things such as the Scriptures present. *We need to have an eternal perspective.* We must look beyond our immediate situations and view all in the light of eternity. James Packer writes:

... Christians should live on earth in the light of heaven, should make decisions in the present with their eye on the future, and should avoid behaving here in a way that would jeopardize their hope of glory hereafter . . . one should live in such a way that the ledgers of eternity will declare one rich before God.¹

All our disciplining should therefore be in the light of God's end result for us. Only as we adopt this perspective will we avoid being diverted by the immediate issues of life—our short-term goals. This is not to say immediate issues are unimportant or unworthy of our attention and involvement—quite the opposite in fact! We *must* be

¹ J. I. Packer, *Laid-back Religion?*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1987, p. 61.

involved in the immediate. But we will view all in the light of eternity, and not permit the immediate to distort our understanding of God's ultimate intention. It is only as we maintain this long-term view of things that we are able *rightly* to handle the immediate. C. S. Lewis said, 'If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next'.²

Charles Spurgeon exhorted his congregation to have a constant eye on eternal issues simply because the time here and now is so short:

Heaven and hell are not places far away. You may be in heaven before the clock ticks again, it is so near. Oh, that we, instead of trifling about such things because they seem so far away, would solemnly realize them, since they are so very near! This very day, before the sun goes down, some hearer now sitting in this place may see the realities of heaven or hell.³

Romans 5:1–4 speaks about the justified person being able to rejoice in the hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, Paul says, 'we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope'.

Again in Romans 8:18 Paul says: 'I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us'. Notice that he is looking at the immediate in the light of what lies ahead in God's purposes. He has the end-goal in view. He has his sights set on the age to come.

All of us have immediate responsibilities, be they home duties, study, work or obligations to others as well as to

ourselves. Often these responsibilities not only become irksome (to say the least!) but also a great burden to us. We can become immersed in our problems. We can be overwhelmed by the immediate matters at hand. We can become despondent and discouraged and even depressed. We could even become disillusioned. If that's the case, then we have probably lost sight of the ultimate end-goal. Or perhaps it just seems too far away, too remote, distant and unrealistic. Whatever the reason, our perspective has become distorted. Thus our best efforts and intentions may evaporate—or at least, get bogged down.

When our immediate events and circumstances actually involve very real suffering, then the issue of perspective is more pressing still. Sudden serious illness, the death of a much loved partner, vicious persecution or vilification because of our faith—these things affect us deeply. Only the Christian has the resources to handle such events, because only the Christian has the advantage of being able to see all in the light of God's ultimate event—the consummation of all things, the age to come. To the young, this may all seem remote and far off and rather unrelated to reality and the 'now'! *That's where faith comes in*. Even the young believer must be walking by faith and believing God's word. All of us, young and old, must be self-disciplined with the view to God's goals, simply because *that's what life is all about*. Consider the apostle Paul's perspective:

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. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified (1 Cor. 9:24–27).

² C. S. Lewis, quoted by Packer in *Laid-back Religion?*, p. 62.

³ Spurgeon, *Spurgeon at His Best*, pp. 66–7.

Note that the athlete does have a goal! When asked how he maintained such consistent wins, Australian swimming champion Ian Thorpe said that he daily applied ‘self-management skills’—meaning he was consistently disciplined in practicing seven or eight hours a day in the pool!⁴ When asked about his chances in the Olympics, he said he did not think too much about that, but wanted ‘to make each day special’ and win on *that* day.

There are no instant athletes and godliness does not come overnight to the believer either—it’s the result of daily ‘training’ and hard work. It means sustained effort as we daily aim at the end-goal of godliness.

In Philippians chapter 3, Paul spoke of his determination to press on to know Christ more and more. He knew that he had no righteousness of his own and that he stood accepted by God only as one who had come to receive a righteousness from him that depended on faith alone. Nevertheless, he also knew that he had to move forward constantly to grasp and know in reality that which he had apprehended by faith. He wanted to know Christ and the power of his resurrection:

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own . . . I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:12, 14).

His goal was to know more and more of the salvation he had already received. He did not stop at what he had already come to understand, but used every means to be stretched out towards the ultimate goal—a full life in Christ. For Paul, this determination entailed effort, it meant

a constant struggle, it meant a daily battle, it meant consistent self-discipline!

When writing to Titus, Paul urged his brother pastor to teach others to be disciplined as they aimed for the goal of being sound in their doctrine, temperate, serious-minded, and sound in faith and love, ‘Likewise, urge the younger men to be self-controlled’ (Titus 2:6). He reminded the Corinthian believers that God’s promises were to be the basis of them setting themselves the goal of being holy in both body and spirit:

Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and of spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7:1).

Peter also wrote about the need to have right goals and to be aiming for them with all our might:

For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love (2 Pet. 1:5–7).

Peter urged his readers to consider the serious days in which they were living and which would continue right up until the coming of Christ. His words are as true for us today as they were for the believers back then. We live now in the last days. We live right now in the midst of those culminating events that point to the coming of the end. We ought to have the goal before us every day of being holy lest the Lord suddenly come and find us wanting:

Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish (2 Pet. 3:14).

⁴ TV interview in September 1999.

We know that God's ultimate intention is that we be like Christ, but we may not be able to see all that is involved in achieving that end. However, we do know what we ought to be doing *today*. Thus we need to set ourselves targets for today and aim for them. Let's determine to make 'each day special' for our wonderful Lord! If our day-to-day goals are only short-term, then at least let them be carried out in the context and general knowledge of the long-term. For example: that exam at the end of the year is important, and I must study for it now *because* it will ultimately equip me all the more for God's long-term goals for me. I may not see it now, but he knows. My obedience to him now in this 'small' target will all the more fit me to be obedient when he faces me with some great task in the years ahead.

We need also to set ourselves guidelines based on the principles we see in the Bible, and then to stay with them. When at times those guidelines *seem* to be outdated or old-fashioned or are ridiculed by our peers, then we must take the long-term view. We must see past the present situation to what is beyond. We should set ourselves priorities and deliberately order our lives accordingly. That means being disciplined in putting first things first:

But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well (Matt. 6:33).

This tells us to seek *first* God's kingdom and his righteousness, and then all these other things—food, clothing, security in life—will be ours as well. This means that our goals must be God's goals and not just our own 'wish-list' of ambitions and ideas of grand achievements! Worldly ambition shows itself in a desire to build a reputation, amass wealth and wield power—*but with no reference to God*. For the Christian, ambition is not wrong so long

as it has God as its focal point. What is *his* will? What does *he* want? What are *his* aims? What is *his* agenda? Oswald Sanders states:

*Many [Christians] fail of worthwhile achievement simply because they have no master ambition, no dominating purpose to unify their lives. They live haphazardly not like Paul, who said, 'This one thing I do.'*⁵

Above all else, we set ourselves the aim of doing all to God's glory. The mundane, the menial, the insignificant, as well as the great endeavours of life—all should be to the glory of God:

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31).

So, then, no matter what task is before me right now, I need to see it as part of that tapestry of my life which God himself is weaving. We only see part of the whole picture. He already sees the final product! Come under his Lordship in this immediate responsibility and know that, as you honour him in it by doing it with all your might to his glory, so in the long-term he will honour you. Keep this perspective before you all the time—under all circumstances and in all situations. Never lose sight of who you are—a son/daughter of the King. Be what you are in all things. *Do not think anything is too unimportant to be considered in this light.*

This brings us to the whole matter of discerning God's will in any given situation. If our goals are to be God's goals, then we need to know his will. We need his guidance at all times. Once we recognise that we have no resources

⁵ J. Oswald Sanders, *Problems of Christian Discipleship*, China Inland Mission, London, 1958, p. 86.

of our own in order to know what is the right and wrong path, we will see how much we urgently need his Spirit to lead and direct us at every turn. The trouble is, we are constantly tempted to think we know what is appropriate in this or that course of action. We are so conceited that we think we can get by without going to the trouble of waiting on God for his leading. In our busyness we feel impatient in having to spend time discerning his plan for us and are frustrated if we can't go ahead and do what we think is just plain 'common sense'! We forget the Scripture which says:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (Isa. 55:8-9).

For this reason we ought to cry out with the Psalmist:

Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths (Ps. 25:4).

Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it (Ps. 119:35).

See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting (Ps. 139:24).

Teach me to do your will, for you are my God. Let your good spirit lead me on a level path (Ps. 143:10).

Throughout our lives we will always need to be knowing God's ways, having learned not to trust our own decision-making abilities! But has not God given us minds with which to work out how we ought to live? Has he not given us the ability to think through what we should be doing in life? Yes, of course, but these abilities are not given so that

we can function independently of him and his purposes. We ought to use all of our God-given abilities to discern what he wants and then move ahead accordingly. If our will is to do his will, then we will know the path ahead.

George Müller was the founder of the famous orphanages in Bristol in the nineteenth century.⁶ During his life he received more than \$350 million to fund the work—all of which came as a result of prayer alone. Not only did he never solicit for money, but he also sought God's leading in every step he took. His goal was always to be doing what the Lord wanted—he made sure *God's goals were his goals*. Müller was often asked how he could know God's will in any given situation. His reply is instructive:

1. I seek at the beginning to *get my heart into such a state that it has no will of its own in regard to a given matter*. Nine-tenths of the difficulties are overcome when our hearts are ready to do the Lord's will, whatever it may be. When one is truly in this state, it is usually but a little way to the knowledge of what His will is.
2. Having done this, *I do not leave the result to feeling or simple impressions*. If so, I make myself liable to great delusions.
3. I seek the will of the Spirit of God through or in connection with the Word of God. The Spirit and the Word must be combined. If I look to the Spirit alone without the Word, I lay myself open to great delusions also.
4. *Next I take into account providential circumstances*. These plainly indicate God's will in connection with His Word and Spirit.
5. *I ask God in prayer to reveal His will to me aright*.
6. *Thus through prayer to God, the study of the Word and reflection, I come to a deliberate judgment according to the best of*

⁶ See my biography on George Müller, NCPI, Blackwood, 1998.

Running the Race

my ability and knowledge, and if my mind is thus at peace, and continues so after two or three more petitions, I proceed accordingly. In trivial matters and in transactions involving most important issues, I have found this method always effective.⁷

The writer of Proverbs chapter 3 reminds us of our need to be seeking the Lord in all that we do. He exhorts us not to trust ourselves nor to rely on our own supposed intelligence and good sense! He encourages us to trust wholeheartedly in the Lord in everything we do and say and think:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. It will be a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body. Honor the LORD with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine (Prov. 3:5–10).

Like George Müller, we need to discipline ourselves to seek God's goals for our life on a day-to-day basis—according to his word and with the perspective of eternity in mind. Thus, everything we do should be towards the goal of being like Christ to God's honour and glory. As we step out in faith each day with these objectives firmly in mind, the Lord will honour our endeavours and rich blessing will come to us through his good hand:

Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace—in peace because they trust in you. Trust in the LORD forever, for in the LORD GOD you have an everlasting rock (Isa. 26:3–4).

⁷ Basil Miller, *George Muller: Man of Faith and Miracles*, Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis, 1941, pp. 50–1.

Disciplined towards Right Goals

Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit (Jer. 17:7–8).

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, *but understand what the will of the Lord is* (Eph. 5:15–17).

When we have God's goals for our life, we are trusting and resting in him for the right outcome. He leads and we follow. He directs and we obey. He prompts and urges us on and we are confident that we are on the right path. We discover that we are at peace in doing his will.

6

Disciplined Discipleship

The New Testament has a great deal to say about discipleship, and as we read some of these passages we may be tempted to think their demands extreme. For example, Jesus said on one occasion:

Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, *cannot be my disciple*. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me *cannot be my disciple* . . . So therefore, *none of you can become my disciple* if you do not give up all your possessions (Luke 14:26–27, 33).

The severity of these requirements for self-renunciation shock us because they seem so severe, rigid and downright impossible! Geoffrey Bingham writes:

If the conditions for discipleship be interpreted legalistically, then they are deadly. The legalist sees Christ, or God as a tight-lipped Demander. He feels the rise of his religious ego, and so derives a perverse joy. He accedes to the demands in grim gladness. Here is something he can do. He can sacrifice all for God! The *way* in which he does it devastates true familial relationships, and makes unclean the good things of life which he has denied. Henceforth

his is the path of the ascetic. Anything that brings joy must be wrong. Anything which delights must be evil. He is wrong.¹

As we seek to work through the implications of what the Scriptures are saying, there are a number of principles we ought to be clear about when considering Christian discipleship:

Firstly, we must view this matter of discipleship and its so-called ‘cost’ in the light of who Jesus Christ is—his person and mission. It is the Lord of Glory who makes this demand; it is Christ, the King of the Kingdom who calls us; it is God’s Son, the Word of Life, by whom and through whom all creation came into being—it is *he* who makes this demand. It is out of love that he calls us to follow, and in the light of who he is and what he is about in history, all else should pale into insignificance. To place any other allegiance before Jesus Christ is not only totally inappropriate, it is also straight-out idolatry and therefore both dangerous and damning. Jesus is telling us that it is not possible to be a disciple of his if something or someone else comes first in our life. It is a contradiction in terms to call him Lord if he does not have preeminence in everything.

When Jesus first began preaching, many of those who heard him began to follow. In Luke 5:1–11 we read of the occasion when Jesus spoke to the crowds from a fishing boat and, at the conclusion, the fishermen ‘left everything and followed him’. This was true discipleship.

Just as those early disciples left everything to follow Jesus, so we ought to be saying a wholehearted ‘yes’ every day to Christ’s call to us. He has chosen us, he has called us,

¹ Geoffrey Bingham, *Discipleship: Doom or Delight?*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1978, pp. 18–19.

he has acted in our lives, we have heard his voice. Our lives are at his disposal and we are to respond to him in obedience no matter what he asks us to do. That's the discipline of true discipleship. The Puritan commentator Matthew Henry once wrote:

A man cannot be Christ's disciple but he must *hate father, and mother, and his own life*. He is not *sincere*, he will not be *constant* and persevering, unless he love Christ better than anything else in this world . . . Every good man loves *his relations*; and yet, if he be a disciple of Christ, he must comparatively *hate them*. Not that their persons must in any degree be hated, but our comfort and satisfaction in them must be lost and swallowed up in our love to Christ. When our duty to our parents comes in competition with our evident duty to Christ, we must give Christ the preference. If we must either *deny Christ* or be *banished* from our families and relations (as many of the primitive Christians were), we must rather lose their society than his favour.²

On April 9th 1945, the German pastor and writer Dietrich Bonhoeffer met his death at the hands of the SS Black Guards. Just prior to the war he had published his book *The Cost of Discipleship* and in his chapter 'The Simplicity of the Carefree Life' he wrote these words:

The life of discipleship can only be maintained so long as nothing is allowed to come between Christ and ourselves—neither the law, nor personal piety, nor even the world. The disciple always looks only to his master, never to Christ *and* the law, Christ *and* religion, Christ *and* the world. He avoids all such notions like the plague. Only by following Christ alone can he preserve a single eye. His eye rests wholly on the light that comes from Christ, and has no darkness or ambiguity in it. As the eye must be single,

² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible by Matthew Henry*, ed. Leslie F. Church, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, 1961, p. 1467.

clear and pure in order to keep light in the body, as hand and foot can receive light from no other source save the eye, as the foot stumbles and the hand misses its mark when the eye is dim, as the whole body is in darkness when the eye is blind; so the follower of Christ is in the light only so long as he looks simply to Christ and at nothing else in the world. Thus the heart of the disciple must be set upon Christ alone. If the eye sees an object which is not there, the whole body is deceived. If the heart is devoted to the mirage of the world, to the creature instead of the Creator, the disciple is lost.³

Four centuries before Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther had written about the true nature of Christian discipleship—addressing his readers as if it were Christ himself speaking to them:

Discipleship is not limited to what you can comprehend—it must transcend all comprehension. Plunge into the deep waters beyond your own comprehension, and I will help you to comprehend even as I do. Bewilderment is the true comprehension. Not to know where you are going is the true knowledge. My comprehension transcends yours. Thus Abraham went forth from his father and not knowing whither he went. He trusted himself to my knowledge, and cared not for his own, and thus he took the right road and came to his journey's end. Behold, that is the way of the cross. You cannot find it yourself, so you must let me lead you as though you were a blind man. Wherefore it is not you, no man, no living creature, but I myself, who instructs you by my word and Spirit in the way you should go. Not the work which you choose, not the suffering you devise, but the road which is clean contrary to all that you choose or contrive or desire—that is the road you must take. To that I call you and in that you must be my disciple. If you do that, there is the acceptable time and there your master is come.⁴

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, SCM Press Ltd, London, 1959, p. 154.

⁴ Martin Luther, quoted in Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, pp. 82–3.

Charles Spurgeon wrote:

I have now concentrated all my prayers into one, and that one prayer is this, that I may die to self, and live wholly to him.⁵

On another occasion he spoke about Christ's Lordship:

I cannot conceive it possible for anyone truly to receive Christ as Savior and yet not to receive him as Lord. A man who is really saved by grace does not need to be told that he is under solemn obligations to serve Christ. The new life within him tells him that. Instead of regarding it as a burden, he gladly surrenders himself—body, soul, and spirit—to the Lord who has redeemed him, reckoning this to be his reasonable service.⁶

The second thing we must recognise is that discipleship is not the means of a person getting saved. Years ago in college lectures I recall Geoffrey Bingham saying:

Discipleship must never be seen as the *cost* of salvation, or the *way* of salvation, but the response to the gift of salvation and the *way* they walk who are his. True discipleship results from the constraint of love.

Salvation is by faith in Christ's propitiation on our behalf. We are saved because we believe he has taken our sin and guilt. Discipleship is what comes after that and is for those who are already on the path of salvation. We now follow because of who he is and what he has done. Of course, this demand for self-denial is costly and requires strong self-discipline. But we must see things in proportion. We must maintain a correct priority. We need to have a clear understanding of what we ought to do and be, both in relation to

our Lord, as well as to society about us. To maintain Christ as pre-eminent in our life is no light thing. We need Paul's perspective:

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him . . . I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead (Phil. 3:7–11).

We saw earlier that a disciple is one who is disciplined to follow his master. For the Christian, all our self-discipline is with the view to being as he is because of what he has been for us. It is not a question of just *knowing* the truth, but of *doing* the truth. Jesus said:

Everyone then who hears these words of mine *and acts on them* will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand (Matt. 7:24–26).

Between the 'knowing' and the 'doing' there is the whole realm of self-discipline, self-control and daily obedience. Jesus *did* the truth. He *lived* the truth—he didn't just talk about it! In our case, as disciples, we may learn to apply this in three basic ways:

- (a) We are to be disciplined in daily living out the truth of Christ in all we do and say and think. *This is the discipline of positive doing.*

⁵ Spurgeon, *Spurgeon at His Best*, p. 35.

⁶ Spurgeon, *Spurgeon at His Best*, p. 120.

- (b) We are to be disciplined in moderating our desires and wishes, which, even though legitimate, must be controlled. *This is the discipline of positive restraint.*
- (c) We are to be disciplined in actually *not* going the way of sin. We abstain from numerous activities that clearly go against the word of God—even though we may once have indulged in them. *This is the discipline of positive avoidance.*

Discipleship is no easy path, but it *is* a glorious path! We should not face it with any degree of dread, but with anticipation and delight. We should see that God has wonderfully provided for us *here and now* to know his blessing—to say nothing of what lies ahead in glory! Jesus said:

Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold *now in this age*—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life (Mark 10:29–30).

Thirdly, we need to understand the important truth that underlies all Christian discipleship: we must see that our coming to Christ and following him is all in the context of God’s kingdom. Jesus declared:

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news (Mark 1:15).

Christian discipleship will be harsh and legalistic and nothing more than a rigid methodology unless it be seen to relate intimately to God’s kingdom. We have been born into an alien kingdom—the kingdom of the god of this world, Satan. He holds us in his powerful grip and is not

about to let his subjects go! But over and above him is the King of all kingdoms—Christ, the sovereign Lord. His coming into our midst as a human being was with the view to releasing the captives (Luke 11:21–23). God himself has come to us and transferred us from that alien kingdom of the enemy to the kingdom of his beloved Son (Col. 1:13). All we do now should be in the context of seeking his kingdom and his righteousness (Matt. 6:33). Because obedience is one of the hallmarks of the Christian disciple, Jesus warned:

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven (Matt. 7:21).

As we have already seen, there is a world of difference between a *profession* of faith and the *practice* of faith. It is often the failure to be disciplined that marks off those believers who do not move forward in their experience and enjoyment of their Christian life. When we see the supreme value of seeking and being in God’s kingdom, all else becomes secondary. When we understand that belonging to God’s kingdom is ultimately the only thing in life that really matters, we will pursue it with all our might! Jesus often spoke about this priority:

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field (Matt. 13:44).

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it (Matt. 13:45–46).

Christ is the King of the Kingdom—soon coming to claim his own!
We ask that this will take place speedily each time

we pray the Lord's Prayer: 'Your kingdom come' (Matt. 6:10). Because the only reality in this life is God's kingdom, his powerful call to those in enemy territory to follow him cannot be taken half-heartedly. We are either for him or against him! God gave the command to Moses that his people were to love him with all their heart and mind and soul and strength. Christ's claim is no less to his disciples.

Along the way there is bound to be suffering for the Christian disciple. When Paul swept through Asia Minor revisiting the many churches he had established during his first missionary journey, he warned them of the inevitability of suffering:

It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22).

We read in the Book of Revelation of the saints who had died for their faith. They were consistent to the end. They persevered. They were steadfast in the face of devilish opposition and persecution, even to the point of laying down their lives for the sake of the kingdom (Rev. 12:11).

The cutting edge of Christian discipleship is generally pretty blunt these days. We live in a society and a culture that is not really committed to anything of substance. Often, as Christians, we are satisfied to go with the tide and take life easy. We are afraid to move out of our 'comfort zone'. We are not keen to hazard the risk and stick our necks out as those who are different. But the call to us from the Scriptures is for a discipleship that has some granite to it! The world desperately needs to see men and women who have some substance to their convictions and who are not afraid to go against the prevailing social trends. We need to show that we are wholly given over to Christ. Sadly, this is unlikely to happen in the life of the believer

who is not self-disciplined and who is not determined to be a fool—in the world's eyes—for the sake of Christ (see 1 Cor. 4:10).

One such 'fool' for Christ was Jim Elliot who gave his life in January 1956 as a missionary to the Auca Indians in Ecuador, South America. He had been in the habit of keeping a detailed journal of his spiritual pilgrimage and wrote one day:

Father, make of me a crisis man. Bring those I contact to decision. Let me not be a milestone on a single road; make me a fork, that men must turn one way or another on facing Christ in me.⁷

Jim determined to discipline himself so that he would be a worthy disciple of Christ, serving only him—irrespective of what it would cost or where it would lead him. However, he did not keep to this resolve without some difficulty, and noted:

I have trouble keeping the prophet's spirit subject to the prophet. The spirit is liquid and easily flows and surges, sinking and boiling with the currents of circumstances. Bringing every thought into the obedience of Christ is no easy-chair job.⁸

On another occasion he wrote in his journal: 'Singleness, simplicity, is required of me. One treasure, a single eye, and a sole Master'.⁹ In 1949, while still at Wheaton College, he penned these now famous words: '*He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose*'.¹⁰

⁷ Elisabeth Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1958, p. 59.

⁸ Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty*, p. 60.

⁹ Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty*, p. 71.

¹⁰ Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty*, p. 15.

That's the heart of a disciple who is disciplined to follow Christ—no matter what.

How might we test out our own level of discipleship? The following verses are a guide and can be used as a simple 'litmus test' of Christian discipleship:

(a) The disciple of Christ should be obedient:

Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples' (John 8:31).

But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing (James 1:25).

(b) The disciple of Christ is to love his fellow believers:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34–35).

We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death . . . And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us (1 John 3:14, 23).

(c) The disciple of Christ should live in humility:

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls (Matt. 11:29).

In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble' (1 Pet. 5:5).

(d) The disciple of Christ may be subject to persecution:

If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'Servants are not greater than their master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me (John 15:18–21).

(e) The disciple of Christ ought to be fruitful:

My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples . . . You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name (John 15:8, 16).

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven (Matt. 5:16).

Ultimately, each of us will just *know* whether or not we are following Christ according to his word. We don't really need a check list!

The Renewed Will

Because Man¹ is a fallen creature, his will is bent (or biased) to do what he, and he alone, wants. God is not in the picture at all (Rom. 3:11). In fact he hates God and resists him with all his might (Rom. 8:7–8). He turns away from God and suppresses the truth concerning him (Rom. 1:18). He does not want him in any shape or form. Fallen Man is fundamentally *self*-centred.

When preaching about the impossibility of anyone coming to Christ of their own volition, Charles Spurgeon said:

*We declare on scriptural authority that the human will is so desperately set on mischief, so depraved, so inclined to everything that is evil, and so disinclined to everything that is good, that without the powerful, supernatural, irresistible influence of the Holy Spirit, no human will will ever be constrained toward Christ.*²

Because this is our state apart from Christ, we are wide open to being manipulated by forces outside ourselves.

¹ 'Man' is used throughout this book as a generic term for all human beings. It has nothing to do with gender.

² Spurgeon, *Spurgeon at His Best*, p. 217.

Thus the will of fallen Man is subject to Satan's directives even though he may never be aware of it. Satan wants us to do that which is contrary to God's will and purposes, and is constantly exercising his evil influences on us to accomplish that end. The Scriptures have some startling things to say to those who think they control their own lives:

You [unbelieving Jews] are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me (John 8:44–45).

God may perhaps grant that they [unbelievers] will repent and come to know the truth, and that they may escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will (2 Tim. 2:25–26).

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death (Heb. 2:14–15).

Though fallen men and women know the truth concerning God, they constantly suppress this truth and will not come to him that they might have life:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth (Rom. 1:18).

You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life (John 5:39–40).

The miracle of conversion is that a person's will is turned around. It is reversed. It is rehabilitated. The bias of our will,

rather than being away from God, is now oriented towards him. We now desire that which we did not desire before. This is both an instantaneous change (at conversion) and an ongoing process. However, because we have not ceased to be sinners, and because indwelling sin constantly dogs our steps, we find our wills to be stubborn and rebellious still, even though our fundamental desire is now *for* God. For this reason the Christian is always having to face a great battle at the level of the will. Because discipleship now demands a constant series of moral choices the will is deeply involved. *Thus self-discipline becomes a fundamental matter of the will.* We are now responsible to take seriously what we should be as persons in God's sight, and what we should be doing in conformity to his will. These issues never arose before our conversion. Now they are very real indeed. So we are bound to take control of ourselves and to act decisively and responsibly in ways that we never had to do before.

All our accomplishments are via the decision-making process in which we now have to ask ourselves such questions as: 'Do I or don't I?' 'Should I or shouldn't I?' 'Will I or won't I?' All I do and say and think now involves moral choices. These are now seen to be for good or ill—for God's glory or my own, positive or negative, in conformity to his will or otherwise. It is by these very choices that God makes provision for our moral and spiritual growth:

About this we have much to say that is hard to explain, since you have become dull in understanding. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. But solid food is for the

mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil (Heb. 5:11–14).

Notice that this passage tells us that our faculties need to be 'trained' by 'practice' to distinguish good from evil. Such discernment of moral good and evil is not automatic! It involves disciplined effort. Of course 'good' and 'evil' here means more than just ethical matters. It means that we have grown and matured through obedience to God to the point where we are able to discern between true and false teaching.

Thus the mature believer is always living out the truth—and the more he or she does so, the more they are able to discern and distinguish good and evil. They will be confronting sin for what it really is, and instead, choosing that which is good. In reality, there is no such thing as passive discernment. We must be in the action of choosing to *do* that which is true and right. By contrast, the lazy believer will not be growing or maturing and so will remain vulnerable and ignorant.

Often great battles result. Very soon we discover to our shame that our will is far from perfect! We begin to realise just how weak we really are. In the next chapter we will look at the *moral* elements of this conflict in the light of Romans chapter 7, but the fact remains, choices relating to day-to-day living have to be made. God calls us to be *doing* not just wishing. We are to be acting and responding to truth not just living in a dream-world of vague hopes. We are to *obey* in all things, and not be slacking off and ducking out of our responsibilities! This means we are to be disciplined in doing the things we don't like doing. We are to be disciplined in facing up to the fact that, since we have certain responsibilities before us, we must get off our backs and get on with the task of doing them. We can no longer

avoid the unpleasant. We can no longer excuse ourselves by shirking our responsibilities. We must rise to our duty and act as those who are reliable and accountable. *None of this is automatic.* It takes the effort of the will where I say to myself: 'I WILL DO IT'.

I suspect we all tend to procrastinate on occasions, especially if the task is a daunting one. Sometimes, however, I tend to procrastinate not because I don't want to do the job before me, but because I really do want to make a good fist of it. The perfectionist streak in me comes out and I baulk. Ideally (I say to myself) I want to make a good job of this. I want to take time over it and think it all through carefully. But the longer I put it off, the more paralysed I become in actually getting on with the job! Instead, I find all sorts of other things to do first—most of which could easily be left for another day.

So, self-discipline in these matters is rarely a clear-cut issue. In fact, it seems some people *need* an urgent sense of responsibility pressing in on them in order to drive them forward to accomplish certain tasks. Dr Paul Tournier quotes his own example:

... by wasting time, I am building up a sense of guilt which I need to drive me to work. It is as though I were building up the power of an auxiliary motor which will get me moving. On the eve of a lecture a moment will come when I shall feel so conscience-stricken at having prepared it so badly that I shall rush to it, just as one must jump into the water from a burning ship.

He then goes on to compare himself with a friend who likewise procrastinates:

What makes us different is that the unease stimulates me, and suddenly gives me wings when it reaches an intolerable level. In his case, however, a bad conscience paralyses him. All his work

is hampered. He cannot settle to another task when the main one is incomplete, and the longer this is put off, the greater his paralysis becomes.³

In passing, I note that Dr Tournier uses the phrase 'a sense of guilt' which he says he needs in order to drive him into action. I understand what he means, but I would prefer to use the expression 'awareness of responsibility'. The word 'guilt' is a strong element in our preaching of the Gospel. We insist that justification removes guilt, and thus any *sense* of guilt needs to be understood in the light of what Christ has done in his finished work on the Cross. In other words, Christ has destroyed all human guilt before God and set us free from its debilitating pressure.

It is so easy to be glib about this matter of self-discipline, but our whole life is tied in with how successful we are in accomplishing our work—whatever it may be. The trouble is, when it comes to doing what God wants, we are all basically lazy! In fact *Australians* tend to have a reputation for laziness and slackness. So, as Christians, we may have to go against what is a temperamental characteristic in our make-up, or, on a broader scale, go against what is part of a national cultural trait within us (see Titus 1:12). Under these circumstances I have to say to myself: 'I will not be lazy', 'I will get involved', 'I will get up and do this job'. Consider the following injunctions of Scripture:

Go to the ant, you lazybones; consider its ways, and be wise. Without having any chief or officer or ruler, it prepares its food in summer, and gathers its sustenance in harvest. How long will you lie there, O lazybones? When will you rise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest,

³ Dr Paul Tournier, *Guilt and Grace*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1962, pp. 25–6.

Running the Race

and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want, like an armed warrior (Prov. 6:6–11).

The appetite of the lazy craves, and gets nothing, while the appetite of the diligent is richly supplied (Prov. 13:4).

One who is slack in work is close kin to a vandal (Prov. 18:9).

The lazy person does not plow in season; harvest comes, and there is nothing to be found (Prov. 20:4).

And we want each one of you to show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end, so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises (Heb. 6:11–12).

It's important to recognise that the various Bible authors do not simply tell us to 'choose'—they give us an incentive! They give us examples to follow and reasons why we ought not to be slack. They encourage us to self-discipline because of the inestimable benefits of living that way!

Self-discipline and the will also include the matter of self-control:

One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one whose temper is controlled than one who captures a city (Prov. 16:32).

Discipline and self-control go hand in hand and the Scriptures constantly exhort the Christian to the latter. Such injunctions would hardly be necessary if it were a natural thing or automatic:

To watch over mouth and tongue is to keep out of trouble (Prov. 21:23).

Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions (Rom. 6:12).

The Renewed Will

... put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires (Rom. 13:14).

I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified (1 Cor. 9:27).

For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle (James 3:2).

For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love (2 Pet. 1:5–7).

It must be recognised that *lack* of self-control may indicate that a person has never come to faith in the first place, as the following passage seems to suggest:

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless (James 1:26).

Discipline in the life of the believer (in respect to self-control) extends to the restraint we ought to exercise even when something is legitimate. There are times when I will not do something simply because if I do, I will offend my brother or sister or cause someone who is young in the faith to stumble. Consider Paul's words in First Corinthians:

'All things are lawful for me,' but not all things are beneficial. 'All things are lawful for me,' but I will not be dominated by anything (1 Cor. 6:12).

'All things are lawful,' but not all things are beneficial. 'All things are lawful,' but not all things build up (1 Cor. 10:23).

In these passages Paul declares that, although there was nothing ‘unlawful’ for him, not all things were helpful. Not all things would be conducive to growth—not in himself, but in others. And so he abstained. He did not do them, even though his own conscience would not have been offended had he done so. Such self-control is for the sake of others and is the way of love:

I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. So do not let your good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat; it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble (Rom. 14:14–21).

On another level, our will must be marshalled so that we discipline ourselves against the ‘I quit’ syndrome. When the way is hard and the going tough, it is very easy just to give up. It’s so easy just to quit. But God has not called us to an impossible life. He has not brought us into new life so as to be overwhelmed and crushed by the difficulties along the way. He has made every provision for us to triumph. Even in the darkest moments we need to press on and know that he is supplying us with a supernatural strength to go forward. Yes, the way *is* hard at times! But we dare not quit. We dare not disobey. We dare not slacken off. The suffering from obedience and self-discipline is nothing compared to the suffering and heartache that comes from disobedience and laziness. Jesus said:

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take *my* yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For *my* yoke is easy, and *my* burden is light (Matt. 11:28–30).

We need to bear the yoke of Christ. We need to come under his Lordship, however that may be worked out in each of our lives. *His* discipline, *his* ‘yoke’, will be right for us—not too heavy, not too burdensome. Notice that Jesus does not ask us to bear just any yoke, but *his* yoke. And not only are we to submit to it when he lays it upon us, but *we are also to willingly take it upon ourselves*. The sooner we learn to bear Christ’s yoke the better, and there is no more appropriate time to begin than when we are young!

The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD. *It is good for one to bear the yoke in youth* (Lam. 3:25–27).

The yoke of self-discipline may seem heavy to bear at first, but it gets lighter and lighter as the years go by. To the mature Christian who has learned to exercise his/her will in disciplined conduct and right living, that yoke of obedience to Christ has become both a joy and an inestimable blessing!

8

What about Indwelling Sin?

In all our discussion so far about self-discipline very little mention has been made of the problem of indwelling sin. Paul talks about his conflict with sin in relation to law in Romans chapter 7. He knows he has been justified by God's grace and that he is no longer under the indictment of the law. A new and wonderful principle of grace has taken over in his life. He is now a free man! The same is true of us. But it is not long before we discover—as did Paul—that the principle of indwelling sin is still operative too! *God has not eradicated sin from us.* He has not made us perfect overnight! We are sinners still—though saved by grace and perfectly righteous in his sight. We have a new mind and now want to serve him. We want to be holy. We want to be like Christ. But the more we try to be what we now *want* to be, the more our steps are dogged by indwelling sin!

The more the law tells us how we ought to live, the more we discover an insidious inner principle of rebellion which forces our hand so that we often go in the opposite direction. Of course, there is nothing wrong with the

law—it is completely blameless in all this. It is blameless because it is spiritual. It can never be wrong. It has a divine origin and character. It proceeds from God and is of God and reflects all that God is. But *we don't!* Unlike the law, we are not spiritual *in and of ourselves.* As fallen creatures we are carnal. We are fleshly. We are human. We have no inherent moral capacity. No, the problem is not with the law but with us!

The point is this: when God created us we were in his moral image and sharing in his glory. We were designed to operate and function in total dependence upon our Creator. God breathed into us his Spirit and we came to life (Gen. 2:7). That life of God in us was a fundamental necessity for us to be truly human. Without him, we are not what he created us to be and are incapable of moral uprightness. Thus in the Fall, Adam and Eve ceased to know true life. Biologically they were alive, but the relational death that came to them was primarily because they had ceased to draw on the life of God for their ongoing existence. God graciously continues to sustain fallen Man, but without a definitive trust and reliance on the Holy Spirit, men and women, boys and girls are 'spiritually' dead (Eph. 2:1).

Let me give a simple illustration of this principle. A fish is only truly a 'fish' when it is in the environment of water. Outside water it ceases to be able to function as a fish—for, although it has been designed never to be anything other than a 'water creature', it is no longer living in that environment. In the same way we are only truly 'human' when we are living in our God-ordained Spirit-environment. We have been designed to be 'spirit-beings'. Outside the Spirit we cease to be truly human. Just as water is the true sphere of life for a fish, so the Spirit is the true sphere of life for a human being.

When we came to faith in Christ we were brought back into the Spirit realm of life. We were born again. We were regenerated. Whereas we were once ‘devoid of the Spirit’ (Jude 1:19) he now enlivens us again. We have been renewed to life by the activity and power of the Holy Spirit. We are now back in a living relationship with the Father.

Our desire now is to do what is pleasing to the Lord. We now want to do that which is right. We don’t want to sin. We don’t want to go the way of evil. We have an inner motivation and longing to be obedient to God and his word. But at the same time we find that sin within us is still stronger than we are *in and of ourselves*. We have no argument with the law for we see that it is the law of God and is holy and just and good (Rom. 7:12). But although we now want to obey that law and do not want to sin we still have no resource of our own with which we can live obedient lives:

For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin (Rom. 7:14).

Of ourselves, we are weak and unable to do anything that is good. Left to ourselves we are impotent. Once again, I remind you that Jesus said: ‘apart from me you can do nothing’ (John 15:5). In other words: there is no way we can, in and of ourselves, obey law and thus do good. We need all the dynamic power of Christ—his Holy Spirit—to do that. *If we look into ourselves seeking some innate capacity or ability by which we can handle the demands of obedience, then we won’t find it.* In fact we will find the opposite:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good (Rom. 7:15–16).

It is one thing to know all these great truths theologically and to be able to work out technically why we still sin as believers, it is quite another matter to have to live with the reality of it day by day! We may well see that we are ‘carnal, sold under sin’, and yet, every time we fail, we wonder how it could have happened! It was not what we wanted! Sin is never what we want! In fact we hate sin. It’s not just that we think it’s wrong—we really detest and hate it and want no part of it. We therefore have to come to the conclusion that, of ourselves, as believers, we never do what we want to do. Of ourselves, we will always go on doing the very thing we hate. Basically, deep down, we will always be this way. Even though we may be regenerate there is always that underlying innate weakness within which prevents us from obeying the law out of our own supposed resources. Geoffrey Bingham says:

Dig down deep and the base rock is always there. In other words, there is never a moment when, as a Christian, I am not this *at core*, yet, at the same time, we have to say that there are millions of moments when we don’t want to be this!¹

This is what Paul says in Romans:

But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me (Rom. 7:17–20).

When Paul says of his sinful actions that it is no longer ‘him’, it sounds like a convenient cop-out to avoid the

¹ Geoffrey Bingham, ‘Romans’, NCTM, 1972, taped lectures.

blame and responsibility of his failure! But that's not what he is saying. John Murray comments:

There is a total difference between surviving sin and reigning sin, the regenerate in conflict with sin and the unregenerate complacent to sin. It is one thing for sin to live in us: it is another for us to live in sin. It is one thing for the enemy to occupy the capital; it is another for his defeated hosts to harass the garrisons of the kingdom.²

Another commentator, Geoffrey Wilson, puts it this way:

... there are not two egos in Paul contending for the mastery. There is but one acting subject, the new man in whom sin has been deposed from its regency [in us as Christians] though not yet expelled from its residency. So that sin is now a 'squatter', and not the true inhabitant...³

As Christians, we have a new desire for God and for obedience. Our desire is *not* to sin. Of ourselves, however, we do not have any innate moral strength with which to carry out those worthy desires. Whenever we fail, it is sin exercising a moral dynamic against us, which, of ourselves, we have no moral resources to combat. Paul says here: 'it is no longer I that do it,' and Geoffrey Bingham asks:

But does he in fact do it? Yes, he does. Why then does he say that he doesn't, when in fact he does? He means, he didn't set out to do it, and never wanted to do it, and in that sense, didn't do it. Why? The basic motivation and thrust to do it did not originate from him. It came from sin which dwelt within him. Sin has come and forced his hand to do what he has done. Sin has been the operator.⁴

² John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied*, Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1961, p. 145.

³ Geoffrey Wilson, *Romans*, Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1976, pp. 120-1.

⁴ Bingham, 'Romans', 1972 taped lectures.

The problem we all face as believers is that we have the will to do what is right, but we do not have—in and of ourselves—the strength or power to execute that will. It is all a question of innate power, and the fact is, we haven't got any! We saw in the last chapter that at our conversion there has been a change in the disposition of our will, but there has not been a change in moral power. In Romans 8:26 Paul talks about the Spirit coming and doing what we cannot do in our state of weakness (Gk: *astheneia*). We don't have the power—in and of ourselves—to carry out what we will. But what we cannot do, *he does*.

In our depths we delight in the law of God and want to do it. We want to be obedient. But how to do it? Left to ourselves we don't have the resources. Every time we set out to do what is right by means of our own power, we fail. We end up doing the very opposite to what we desire. We do the very thing we hate.

Clearly, sin dwells in our mortal bodies, but we are told to not let it reign (Rom. 6:12-13). Sin dwelling in our bodies is always stronger than we are of ourselves. Sin is a powerful and dynamic force and we will never win if we pit our own resources against it. Thus, every time we fail, sin has come and forced our hand to do what basically we did not want to do: 'it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me'.

These verses in Romans chapter 7 indicate that there is a duality in the experience of the believer that was never there prior to conversion. It reminds us that we live in the two realms simultaneously and the outworking of that dual situation is a tension in the believer's life that cannot be avoided this side of the grave. Let me explain briefly what I mean. We were all born 'in Adam'. We were born into a realm that related to Adam and all the consequences of his

fall—sin, guilt, death, condemnation, God’s wrath, and so on. That’s the realm into which all human beings were born and in which they exist. But the Christian has been *born again* into another realm—the realm of life, justification, forgiveness, adoption, the Spirit. Legally and relationally we have been transferred from one realm to the other:

He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son (Col. 1:13).

But we have not yet ‘arrived’ in that new kingdom! As Philippians 3:20 indicates, we are citizens of the new kingdom but are still living in the old. In that sense, believers are in two realms simultaneously and it is this ‘duality’ that causes constant tension in our day-to-day living.

Hence verse 18 of Romans 7 is an important key to understanding this whole principle which Paul is expounding here. He says:

For I know that nothing *good* dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.

We are so proud. We keep thinking that we have something good innately within us, so that of ourselves we *can* accomplish that which is good in God’s eyes. But this is a fiction! Goodness comes from God alone. It is a fruit of the Spirit. Of ourselves, there is absolutely nothing in us that is essentially good. If there *was* something in us which of itself was good, then it would put us on a par with God. There would be some hope resident within us which would make the Cross unnecessary. It would mean that we have some moral ability without the need for the Holy Spirit.

Only when we are living in the fundamental harmony of things-as-they-really-are, is there ‘good’ in us, and only as we

are drawing upon the resources that God supplies through his Spirit can we ever say that we are *doing* good. Geoffrey Bingham comments:

We must stop saying to ourselves ‘I of myself must achieve this goal. I of myself must do this.’ In fact, we are liberated from the necessity—in our own strength—of ever having to accomplish any good! This does not mean that we give up and say: ‘I don’t have to worry any more because, seeing I can’t do it, why bother!’ We can’t use our inability as an excuse. That would be a let-out and a dangerous position to be in. We *must* do it! So, I have to say: ‘I can’t *of myself* do it—but I see that I *can*, but not in my own strength. I *must*, whether I have any strength or not, *because I must now draw upon the power of the Holy Spirit*’. This is an incredibly liberating conclusion! It is a recognition of what we are—that is, of ourselves we are constitutional failures! We are incapable of ever doing any good out of our own ability. At the same time, we are free to operate and accomplish fantastic things in the power and unction of the Holy Spirit. Of course, it hurts our pride to have to recognise this, because we think so highly of our own capacities, and we don’t want to have to be a creature totally dependent upon our Creator. All this brings us back to Jesus’ statement in John 15:5, ‘He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, *for apart from me you can do nothing*’.⁵

Compare this with Paul’s statement in Second Corinthians:

Not that we are competent [or sufficient] of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence [or sufficiency] is from God (2 Cor. 3:5).

Here he is talking about his ability or competence to be a consistent and worthy minister of the Gospel. Of himself he can’t do it. But when he trusts and relies entirely on the

⁵ Bingham, ‘Romans’, 1972 taped lectures.

grace and goodness and strength of Christ, he can and does do it!

Coming back to Romans chapter 7, Paul continues with the statement:

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members (Rom. 7:21–23).

Here then is another fundamental principle. Whenever—not just sometimes—*whenever* we want to do right, evil is present with us. In fact, evil lies close at hand and is ready to pounce. The very instant we set out to will to do good, evil comes *and is there*. It is there, ready to be on the spot at that very moment (see Gen. 4:7, ‘If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it’).

Why are we so surprised when we discover this principle working out in our daily experience? We should not be cast down, but rather, recognise that this is how it is! Geoffrey Bingham asks:

How many times have you determined on a course of right action, and as sure as you say it, what happens?—the very thing you determined not to do, you do! It happens *because* you say it. When we say, ‘There’s my goal, I’m going to reach it’, inevitably I don’t. When we determine to do good, evil says: ‘I’ll slap him down’. Whenever I say, ‘Lord, don’t let me fall’, I’m really saying: ‘Lord, I’m operating pretty powerfully here, so come alongside and assist me in this operation’.

If I’m in full relationship with the Lord, then I’m simply obeying him, rather than using him as an auxiliary engine to turn on when the situation is a bit tougher than what I can manage! What the

Bible is telling me is that I am to be filled with the Spirit; I am to be aglow with the Spirit; I am to receive the supply of the Spirit; I am to be watchful; I am to be sober; I am to be vigilant. These are all *commands*. If I am living in the good of this, then what will happen when I am tempted?—I won’t yield. This is an overcoming, counteracting situation. The instant I move away from a total reliance on the Spirit, I’m done for. Sin will have me by the throat and I’ll never win the struggle against it. We must recognise that this is how things are, and so learn to walk accordingly—in the Spirit.⁶

Only a believer *delights* in the law of God. Only a believer *hates* sin (Rom. 7:15). These expressions are true only of the regenerate, and hence this whole section in Romans chapter 7 is clearly a description of a believing person. The words Paul uses here remind us of the Psalmist and his delight in God’s law:

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night (Ps. 1:1–2).

I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart (Ps. 40:8).

I delight in the way of your decrees as much as in all riches . . . Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long (Ps. 119:14, 97).

Because we are regenerate persons, we desire to do what God wants us to do. We want to obey his law. We want to serve him. We want to be holy. We want to be like Christ. We do not want to go the way of evil. We recognise that so long as we are in this body, we will have certain passions,

⁶ Bingham, ‘Romans’, 1972 taped lectures.

natural instincts and drives which are quite right and legitimate and proper—because that’s how God has made us. But we also see that there is this powerful principle of indwelling sin at work within us, constantly seeking to force our hand so that the good which we desire so much does not eventuate. The legitimate gets twisted to become the illicit. Our deepest desires for good are constantly in conflict with this principle of sin at work in us. They are at war! They are forever opposed to one another! Every time we set out to operate properly in accordance with the law of our mind (which delights in God’s law), we have sin present, trying to stimulate us so that we don’t obey. As long as we are in these bodies, we can never escape this principle. We are captives to this law—to this principle—and it is always going to be at work in us so long as we are alive. Hear what Paul says:

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want (Gal. 5:16–17).

Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones observes:

Here then is this man, with his mind delighting in the Law of God; but there is another law operating in his members which has a fiendish, devilish strategy. It is always watching the moves of the other law in his mind, and it is countering every move. It has a definite strategy and wages a kind of military campaign. What Paul means is, that as certainly as he delights in the Law of God with his mind, and wants to do it, then this other law that is in his members begins to urge the opposite, and puts its opposition in an attractive form, and strives to dictate to him what he should do. He wants with the mind to serve the Law of God; but this

other power brings out all its forces and reserves to prevent his doing so, and to make him do the exact opposite.⁷

There will always be conflict in the life of the believer. We can’t escape indwelling sin. We wish it were not so, but it is there! We have to face it and be honest about our own innate inability to handle it. We also have to face the sad fact that we do not—with consistency—walk in the Spirit. With our renewed mind we have a high intention and desire for obedience—but our ‘flesh’ just can’t handle it and we do not have the resources in and of ourselves. Thus every time we fail to walk in the Spirit, we lapse into the old ways—into the old conflict. Why? Because sin is still there and moral inability is still there. Our sense of failure rushes back and we’re crushed by it. We are appalled by what we do and say and think. It’s not what we wanted! How easily that cry comes from the depths of our heart: ‘Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?’ (Rom. 7:24). The answer, of course, is Jesus Christ!

Geoffrey Bingham says:

What I would like, is to be able to come to Christ, to be a new creation, to have the power of the Holy Spirit, and to be totally obedient in every action. I’d like never to have the sorrow and contrition of having failed. But within me is a power stronger than I am, which, the moment I cease to abide in Christ, HAS ME! This is the vile rape of sin, which degrades and humiliates, and under which we groan. It’s more powerful than I am, and I can’t do anything about it. I wish I didn’t have to be on the alert against it all the time. I wish I didn’t have to wrestle all the time. We keep having to fight the same battles over and over again.

⁷ Dr D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapters 7:1 – 8:4*, Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1973, p. 219.

Just when we think we have licked some temptation, along it comes again and we're in the battle once more!⁸

Sin will always indwell our bodies. Deliverance comes only through the Holy Spirit. He, and he alone, keeps us from the dreadful danger of human pride where we say: 'I can handle it, I can lick this'. By depending entirely on the Holy Spirit, we are built up in the moral conflict with the enemy, and Christ will enable us to be conquerors. By living in the dynamic of the Holy Spirit and by knowing the reality of God's love there is an overcoming of indwelling sin—*though it is never of ourselves*. This conflict stretches us out and matures us and builds us up. It helps us really understand the nature of sin, the nature of God and the substance of good and of holiness. It may take us a long time to see that what appears to be our greatest curse can prove to be our greatest blessing!

John Newton once wrote about the advantages of sin remaining in us:

If the evils we feel were not capable of being over-ruled for good, he [God] would not permit them to remain in us . . . As to the remedy, neither our state or his honour are affected by the workings of indwelling sin . . . Though sin wars, it shall not reign; and though it breaks our peace, it cannot separate from his love . . . Every day draws forth some new corruption which before was little observed, or at least discovers it in a stronger light than before. Thus by degrees they are weaned from leaning to any supposed wisdom, power, or goodness in themselves . . . Whoever is truly humbled will not be easily angry, will not be positive and rash, will be compassionate and tender to the infirmities of his fellow-sinners, knowing that if there be a difference, it is grace that has made it . . .⁹

Nevertheless, the conflict makes us groan! (see Rom. 8:23). But deliverance is coming—not immediately, but in the future: 'who *will* deliver me?' Jesus Christ is going to set us free!

⁸ Bingham, 'Romans', 1972 taped lectures.

⁹ John Newton, *Letters of John Newton*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1960, pp. 131–2, 134–5.

9

Being Spirit-Controlled

Much of what has been said so far could be discouraging, simply because we all recognise how weak we are in disciplining ourselves in daily life in order to be holy. The goal may seem an impossible one. The way ahead may seem to be just too hard. We can set up a program of desired spiritual targets and yet fail miserably to attain them. The problem is, we are often tempted to rely on our own structures of self-discipline for holiness rather than on the Holy Spirit. Of our need to be totally dependent on God, Charles Spurgeon wrote:

Without the Spirit of God we can do nothing. We are as ships without wind or chariots without steeds. Like branches without sap, we are withered. Like coals without fire, we are useless. As an offering without the sacrificial flame, we are unaccepted.¹

On the natural level, a great musician or an outstanding athlete may have achieved their desired objective by means of strict discipline. But on the moral level, no one is equipped to attain the desired goal *in and of themselves*.

As we saw in the last chapter we are all constitutional failures. However, God does not leave us to cope alone. His great gift of the Holy Spirit to his children is with the intention of enabling them to move forward in power. We keep coming back to Jesus' words: 'Apart from me you can do nothing' (John 15:5). Self-discipline in the moral area of life is an impossible task without the Holy Spirit working in us energising and enabling us. Sin is *always* stronger than we are of ourselves. So too is Satan.

We have talked a great deal about our responsibility to be training ourselves for godliness, to be working hard at being disciplined, to be making every effort to be holy. This could sound as if it all depends on us, and, that if we are not successful in achieving these ends then our life as Christians will be a miserable failure! That might be true if it were not for the Holy Spirit who is always working in us. We must recognise that our duty to obey is not in any way a contradiction of the fact that we need the Holy Spirit every moment in order to obey! Jerry Bridges writes:

We cannot do anything spiritually good apart from the working of His Spirit within us. If we are going to make any progress in becoming more like Christ, we must learn to rely on the Holy Spirit rather than on our own virtues and abilities.²

The great North American theologian of the eighteenth century, Jonathan Edwards, once set himself a list of seventy resolutions by which he would discipline himself with a view to governing his daily living. But he prefaced his list with the words:

Being sensible that I am unable to do any thing without God's help, I do humbly entreat him, by his grace, to enable me to keep

¹ Spurgeon, *Spurgeon at His Best*, p. 102.

² Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace*, p. 137.

these Resolutions, so far as they are agreeable to his will, for Christ's sake.³

Just before his death, Christ taught his disciples about the coming, promised Holy Spirit. Up to that point Jesus had been their teacher, but once the Spirit came, he would be the One to teach and lead them in the truth:

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you . . . But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you (John 14:16–17, 26).

When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf (John 15:26).

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you (John 16:13–14).

Just as for the disciples back then, God gives us his Holy Spirit to communicate Christ to us. He proceeds from the Father to bring to us the mind of the Father. He reveals his will to us. He interprets his word to us. He empowers us to obey. He gives us strength to resist the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. It is he who seeks to conform us daily to be like Christ—to be in his image. It is impossible for us to know or understand anything of the

truth of God apart from the inner working of the Holy Spirit. It is by him that spiritual realities come to us. Without him we remain in the dark:

But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him'—*these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit*; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also *no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God*. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual. Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:9–14).

Since the Spirit of God dwells in us from the moment of our conversion, John tells us that we have an anointing of the Spirit by which we know all things! He is the Spirit of truth and hence we already know all that we need to know concerning the truth!

But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge. I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and you know that no lie comes from the truth . . . As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him (1 John 2:20–21, 27).

Of course, knowing the truth is not just a matter of having a lot of head knowledge *about* God and *about* Christ. We know the truth only as we *do* it! We know the truth by

³ Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace*, p. 137.

obeying the truth. The truth is to be lived and experienced. When we obey then we really know! Thus the inner working of the Holy Spirit is with the view to us living in the truth of God day by day. For our part, that takes resolve and discipline. Living in the truth—living in the Spirit—is called ‘abiding in Christ’, ‘abiding in him’, ‘abiding in the truth’. And it doesn’t just happen. We have the responsibility to be walking in step with the Spirit every moment of every day.

When moral choices have to be made, the indwelling Holy Spirit is there to bolster our wills. When *our* will is to do *his* will, then there is action and he is there to enable us to do it. Our self-discipline is not therefore a cold, harsh, detached, isolated battle which we must wage on our own. Rather, any effort and determination on our part to move forward according to God’s word will immediately be matched by the empowering Holy Spirit. He will be there in that instant to enable us to do his will. Hence Paul can say: ‘I can do all things through him who strengthens me’ (Phil. 4:13). Jerry Bridges observes:

We are not passive in the pursuit of holiness. We are the ones who love. We are the ones who clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience (Colossians 3:12). But we do this in utter dependence on Him who gives us strength.⁴

To the Christian, all things are possible—though never in our own right or through our own resources. Jay Adams says:

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 . . . The Holy Spirit can change any Christian, and does.⁵

When we obey in accord with God’s will, we are fully assured of the ability to achieve what he desires. Not even sin can stop us:

. . . for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live (Rom. 8:13).

Nor can Satan defeat us:

Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you [the Holy Spirit] is greater than the one who is in the world [Satan] (1 John 4:4).

Thus God’s Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of holiness, the Spirit of the Father, the Spirit of truth, dwells in us. Our body is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. This places on us a great responsibility. We dare not take lightly the fact that we have been bought with a price and that we are not our own. We are responsible to glorify God in our body as the temple of the Holy Spirit:

. . . do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body (1 Cor. 6:19–20).

Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple (1 Cor. 3:16–17).

⁴ Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace*, p. 132.

⁵ Adams, *Godliness through Discipline*, p. 16.

Our day-to-day conduct must therefore be in conformity with the character and nature of God’s Holy Spirit dwelling in us. That should immediately dictate to us how we think, where we go, what we do, what we say, how we behave, what company we keep, what we look at, what we listen to, and so on. He dwells in us to conform us to Christ. *Whenever we go against that desire of his we grieve him.* We are warned of this in Ephesians:

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption (Eph. 4:30).

Any pattern of life that is ungodly will grieve the Holy Spirit. Because ‘grieve’ is a love word, we can only grieve someone who loves us very much. Hence to grieve the Holy Spirit is to ‘hurt’ this one who loves us deeply.

In First Thessalonians Paul warns us not to quench the Holy Spirit, and the context suggests a whole series of demands requiring self-discipline:

But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. *Do not quench the Spirit.* Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil (1 Thess. 5:12–22).

We began these studies by talking about godliness—holiness of life. Only the *Holy* Spirit can bring such godliness to maturity in us. We are totally dependent upon him.

The importance of self-discipline cannot be emphasised enough—especially in regard to living in such a manner as is well pleasing to the Lord. This is not just in the big things of life, but very much so in the little things as well. Horatius Bonar says of the holy life:

The avoidance of little evils, little sins, little inconsistencies, little weaknesses, little follies, little indiscretions and imprudencies, little foibles, little indulgences of self and of the flesh, little acts of indolence or indecision or slovenliness or cowardice, little equivocations or aberrations from high integrity, little touches of shabbiness and meanness, little bits of covetousness and penuriousness, little exhibitions of worldliness and gaiety, little indifferences to the feelings or wishes of others, little outbreaks of temper, or crossness, or selfishness, or vanity—the avoidance of such *little* things as these goes far to make up at least the negative beauty of a holy life.⁶

It would be sad if the Holy Spirit brought us to the truth, and yet we responded to him only up to a point. We would be saying in effect: ‘Thus far will I go and no further’. In reality, we probably all have our cut-off levels of obedience, but in so doing, we cut ourselves off from him and from that which he seeks to communicate to us. In fact, we should have no cut-off level at all. We should be wide open to the Spirit to be led by him whatever, whenever, wherever—just as it was in the life of Jesus. This demands unqualified obedience and consistent self-discipline as we pursue holiness of life. Charles Spurgeon said:

You will not gain holiness by standing still. Nobody ever grew holy without consenting, desiring, and agonizing to be holy. Sin will grow without sowing, but holiness needs cultivation. Follow it; it will not run after you. You must pursue it with

⁶ Bonar, *God’s Way of Holiness*, p. 109.

Running the Race

determination, with eagerness, with perseverance, as a hunter pursues his prey.⁷

Self-control, self-discipline, self-restraint ('temperance' in the *AV*) is listed as a fruit of the Spirit in Galatians. In other words, self-control in the moral realm is not something that comes naturally to any of us, but is the product of the work of the Holy Spirit within us. *He* enables us to exercise self-control, *he* enables us to be restrained against sin and evil, *he* enables us to be disciplined:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and *self-control*. There is no law against such things (Gal. 5:22–23).

We must therefore look to the Holy Spirit to bring to fruition in our lives that which we cannot produce of ourselves. Hence Paul exhorts us to 'walk in the Spirit' and to 'sow to the Spirit':

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh (Gal. 5:16).

If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit (Gal. 5:25).

If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit (Gal. 6:8).

Since everything we do and say and think is a 'sowing', we ought to be taking care that we are sowing to the Spirit and not to the flesh. There is no middle option! Whether we have recognised it or not, all of life is a sowing and a

Being Spirit-Controlled

reaping. There is nothing that is sown that will not have a harvest! For example:

To walk law-way, being judgemental of those who stumble, living by comparisons with one another to maintain a place of superiority, and living in a niggardly way is to sow to one's own flesh. To sow to one's own selfishness is to operate as though the word of grace had never come. Those who live in such a way will reap what they sow.⁸

On the other hand, we sow to the Spirit when we defer to him and obediently follow his leading in all our activities of life. He leads, he guides, he empowers, he enables, he directs, he restrains, he preserves, he illuminates. If we sow to the Spirit there will be much to show for it both now and at the end. We will 'reap' eternal life! The experience of true life will always be the outcome of sowing to the Spirit.

We must never lose sight of the fact that it is *God* who is at work in us!

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to *will* and to *work* for his good pleasure (Phil. 2:12–13).

In his book *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, Dr James Packer says:

The Christian can and must mortify sin through the Spirit (Romans 8:13); he can and must walk in the Spirit, in a steady course of godliness and good works (Romans 8:4; Galatians 5:16, 25). This means that he will stop doing certain things that he did before and that unconverted folk still do, and he will start doing

⁷ Spurgeon, *Spurgeon at His Best*, p. 354.

⁸ Noel Due, *Paul's Letter to the Galatians*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1993, pp. 54–5.

other things instead. The desires of the Spirit, felt in the believer's own spirit (that is, his consciousness) are to be followed, but the desires of the flesh are not to be indulged.⁹

To 'keep in step with the Spirit' (as Packer puts it) is not automatic—it flows out of a daily discipline of the heart and mind and will of the believer as he or she is determined to respond to the Spirit's leading:

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace . . . For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God (Rom. 8:6, 14).

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope *by the power of the Holy Spirit* (Rom. 15:13).

The urgent need in the church today is for men and women to be filled with the Spirit. We must be living in the Spirit, thinking with his mind, following his leading, trusting his wisdom, relying on his promptings, expecting his intervention in our lives, and resting entirely on his enabling in all things. Anything less is hardly true discipleship and falls far short of the picture given in the New Testament of the 'normal' Christian life.

⁹ J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1984, pp. 36–7.

10

Discipline and Bible Study—1

In his book *Laid-back Religion?* Dr James Packer asks a series of questions:

What is God up to in his world, bewildering and agonizing as it so often proves to be? Who is entitled to claim his acquaintance? What will holiness require of me? How will God guide me? Will he guide me at all? Is there such a thing as divine healing? What should I expect from God when I am sick, or when I feel broken into little pieces? How should I react to the present conditions of the church?¹

He then goes on to talk about making a map of all the problems of life and superimposing over them the relevant biblical teachings and Bible-based considerations. He then says:

The Christian life is cross-country travel all the way, with hedges and ditches, ups and downs, rough places and smooth places, deserts and swamps. There are storms and fogs periodically

¹ Packer, *Laid-back Religion?*, pp. 10–11.

punctuating the sunshine. The purpose of the map is to enable the walker to find the true path.²

But suppose the walker (that is, the Christian pilgrim) can't be bothered to regularly consult the map? What might happen? How will he or she know the way? How would such a person be able to discern what is the right or wrong path in any given circumstance? How easily might the walker get lost and not know it, if the map is not used?

God has given us his written word as the means by which we may know his path for us. It tells us about his intentions for us fallen human beings. It gives certain promises about salvation, life and eternity, and it shows us the way God fulfils those promises. But the Bible is far more than a mere 'map'! It is the only book in the world that shows us what God is like. It is the Bible which tells us about ourselves and our need. It is the Bible which accurately documents where we came from, why we are here and where we are going. Only the Bible tells us what history is all about. No other book reveals to us God's way of salvation. It tells us how we can be forgiven and how we can live in a new relationship with our Father-Creator. Only the Bible tells us how to live and how to please and honour the Living God. Only the Bible provides us with a window into our soul so that we can understand ourselves and our inner needs. The Bible—like no other book on earth—'feeds' our souls with spiritual nourishment. The Bible is God's way of supplying our spiritual food, day-by-day. Without it, we will spiritually starve and waste away.

² Packer, *Laid-back Religion?*, p. 11.

Of course, other books may help us; other books may encourage us; other books may thrill us; other books may educate us; other books may stimulate our minds; other books may be helpful in many practical and useful ways; other books may entertain us; other books may comfort us; other books may give us hope. *But only the Bible can give us life.* Only the Bible can change us from the inside out. Only the Bible gives us a perspective of eternity. Only the Bible can provide us with an insight into the mind of God himself. What's more, God has chosen to give us this amazing book as the prime means by which his Spirit speaks into our heart and mind and conscience. It is by means of the Bible and its eternal message that God has chosen to speak to the world and bring men and women under conviction of their need to know him. Charles Spurgeon declared:

*Bible study is the meat that makes a Christian. This is the strong meat on which holy men are nourished. This is that which makes the bone and sinew of men who keep God's way in defiance of every adversary.*³

We must understand that the Bible has been authored by the Holy Spirit for our benefit. God knew that his people would need a daily guide to living and has therefore committed his word to writing so that we may never be in the dark about him, about his will, about ourselves, about life or about the future:

First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God (2 Pet. 1:20-21).

³ Spurgeon, *Spurgeon at His Best*, p. 25.

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope (Rom. 15:4).

The Bible tells us only what we really *need* to know:

For God in His wisdom has certainly made no attempt merely to satisfy our idle curiosity or speculations; but He has graciously revealed to us all that is necessary for our salvation and growth to spiritual maturity.⁴

It is a ‘map’ that is more than sufficient, not only for our spiritual day-to-day requirements, but also for our eternal welfare. We all recognise that there is much about God and his will that we do not know because the Bible does not tell us. But what it says we must take seriously and apply to our lives immediately. He has given us his word so that we might know it, but, more to the point, that we might obey it!

The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the revealed things belong to us and to our children forever, to observe all the words of this law (Deut. 29:29).

For the Christian, the Bible is not just another textbook. It is our source of life and knowledge of all things spiritual. Without it we cannot survive as healthy believers. If we neglect this book we will suffer because complacency is a deadly foe of all spiritual growth. We will never be strong unless we spend time in this book. We will always lack

⁴ J. D. C. Anderson, *The Quiet Time*, IVF, London, 1957, p. 19.

clear insight into the things of life that matter most. We will be without light to guide us in both good and bad times. We will be without sustenance when ultimately nothing else can satisfy our inner hunger.

A. W. Tozer once observed in regard to good preaching:

... it is not mere words that nourish the soul, but God Himself, and unless and until the hearers find God in personal experience they are not better for having heard the truth.⁵

The same might be applied to our need to be meeting personally with God in the Scriptures day by day. We can read the Bible in such a way as not to be moved or touched by what we have read. We may be informed and have gained more knowledge by our reading, but has our life been *changed* during our private reflections? Have we met with God himself in our meditation on his word? We may have a thirst for God but we will never be satisfied unless we drink deeply at the Fountain of Living Water—Christ himself and his word.

Most people eat at least one good meal a day. Very few willingly skip eating for too long! It is natural to eat. It is a necessity to eat. It is a pleasure to eat! We all know that we need to eat in order to stay alive. Exactly the same principles apply to our need for daily spiritual nourishment. Unless we recognise that our soul is in as much need of ‘feeding’ as is our body, we will starve spiritually.

Years ago there used to be a sign on the wall of a bakery next to the railway near Redfern in Sydney which said: WHAT YOU EAT TODAY WALKS AND TALKS TOMORROW.

⁵ A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, Marshall, Morgan & Scott, Edinburgh, 1961, pp. 9–10.

How aptly that describes our need to feed on the word of God each day! What we read and absorb today is nourishment and strength for tomorrow's needs in our on-going walk of faith. That's why the Christian urgently needs to read the Bible daily. We need to know what it says. We need to think through its injunctions. We need to chew over its commands and instructions. Unlike other books, the Bible can't just be read through a couple of times and then put aside on the assumption that its contents are now known and understood. It doesn't work like that—any more than one huge meal can satisfy us for the rest of our days! The Holy Spirit is the author of this book and he chooses to reveal its meaning when and how he sees fit. We may read a passage one day and see nothing, but then when it is read at some other time it comes to life just when we need that particular truth the most. The revelation by the Spirit comes to us according to God's sovereign purposes for us and according to our need at any given moment.

That brings us to the matter of discipline and the word of God! We must learn to discipline ourselves to read the Scriptures every day. This reading is not to be haphazard but systematic and thoughtful. We must take seriously our need and know that the time spent in the word of God is a dire necessity. Our very lives depend on it! We are to persevere even when we may not think we are getting anything out of it or don't feel like it. We are to persist, day in, day out. We need to read and to go on reading. Dr J. W. Alexander once said:

The lifeboat may have a tasteful shape and beautiful decoration, but these are not the qualities for which I prize it: it was my salvation from the howling sea! So the interest which a regenerate soul takes in the Bible is founded on a personal application to the

heart of the saving truth which it contains. If there is no taste for this truth, there can be no relish for the Scriptures.⁶

Now, reading the Bible is one thing, really thinking about what we are reading is another matter altogether. It is so easy to read in a mechanical way that is little more than a habit. We can get into a rut in our reading of the Bible. The disciplined person will set aside a time each day that is dedicated to the Lord and his word. This is a special time. It is a 'space' that must be guarded and preserved in the midst of all the other pressing demands on our time. As we come to him in this attitude of heart, we can expect the Lord to honour us and so speak to us through his word. Taking time may be very costly. Thinking and pondering on what is being read may seem like a waste of time—there are so many other things to do! But if we take seriously our Lord's commands, and his desire to bless us and use us, then we will make time.

When George Whitefield began to live by 'rule and method' in Oxford, he came to see the importance of daily meeting with God over the Scriptures. He was so convinced the Bible had priority over all other distractions (including other books) that he wrote:

My mind being now more open and enlarged, I began to read the Holy Scriptures upon my knees, laying aside all other books, and praying over, if possible, every line and word. This proved meat indeed, and drink indeed, to my soul. I daily received fresh life, light, and power from above.⁷

Whitefield developed the habit of working over everything he read in the Scriptures, thinking through the passages and applying them immediately to his life.

⁶ J. W. Alexander, quoted in *The Quotable Spurgeon*, p. 154.

⁷ Whitefield, *George Whitefield's Journal*, p. 60.

Reflecting on the need for us to saturate ourselves in the word of God, John Piper quotes the example of Hudson Taylor, the founder of the China Inland Mission:

It was not easy for Mr. Taylor, in his changeful life, to make time for prayer and Bible study, but he knew that it was vital. Well do the writers [Dr and Mrs Howard Taylor] remember traveling with him month after month in northern China, by cart and wheelbarrow with the poorest of inns at night. Often with only one large room for coolies and travelers alike, they would screen off a corner for their father and another for themselves, with curtains of some sort; and then, after sleep at last had brought a measure of quiet, they would hear a match struck and see the flicker of candlelight which told that Mr. Taylor, however weary, was poring over the little Bible in two volumes always at hand. From two to four A.M. was the time he usually gave to prayer; the time he could be most sure of being undisturbed to wait upon God.⁸

This leads me to consider another aspect of discipline and the word of God—meditation! Speaking about the marks of our modern Western culture, Dr James Packer says:

We make a show of enthusiasm about this and that, but our feelings are only skin deep. Basically we are blasé, laid back, deeply moved by nothing except our own private concerns . . . Sustained imaginative reflection is, if I am not mistaken, so rare today that few of us understand its power to motivate, and are not ourselves motivated by it. Meditation is the historic Christian word for focused thinking that motivates, but how much meditating do we do?⁹

Indeed, how much meditation do we do? Meditation on the Scriptures is like a cow chewing its cud. It is a going over and over the passage and pondering on it—thinking it

⁸ John Piper, *Desiring God*, Multnomah Publishing Inc., Oregon, 1986, pp. 129–30.

⁹ Packer, *Laid-back Religion?*, pp. 63–4.

through and having the Holy Spirit bring into our understanding its deeper meaning and application. I am not talking about some form of mystical navel-gazing! The person who meditates aright does not do so in some mindless, abstract way, but as a rational, thinking creature who was created in God's image. 'He considers, he contemplates, he muses and he ruminates. He sees evidence and draws conclusions.'¹⁰ But such meditation takes time. Meditation requires that we learn to be quiet and undistracted. It means we deliberately set aside a block of time each day to be with the Lord and in his presence with his word open before us. This is a determined resolve to actually have the Lord speak to us through his written word:

In our meditation we ponder the chosen text on the strength of the promise that it has something utterly personal to say to us for this day and for our Christian life, that it is not only God's Word for the Church, but also God's Word for us individually. We expose ourselves to the specific word until it addresses us personally. And when we do this, we are doing no more than the simplest, untutored Christian does every day; we read God's Word as God's Word for us.¹¹

Without being disciplined, our rushed times of reading are unlikely to bear much fruit. We will pick up bits and pieces here and there on the run, but the Lord will not be very real to us. We may give him a token 'quiet time' each day but the predominant matters on our mind will be those things that interest us in life and about which we are preoccupied. It is no light thing to be disciplined each day to read and

¹⁰ Geoffrey C. Bingham, *The Christian Meditator*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1986, p. 7.

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, SCM, London, 1954, p. 72.

meditate on the word of God. Only thus will he be real to us and powerful in our lives. It doesn't just happen! In fact, everything is against us, as James Packer observes:

...indwelling sin opposes, and the world around distracts. Satan, temptation's ringmaster, is resolved that love and purity shall not blossom if he can help it. Therefore, constant effort has to be made to keep thoughts of love and hope toward God vivid, and their motivating effect powerful.¹²

Geoffrey Bingham points out that the Old Testament writers had basically three objects in mind when they meditated: God himself, the Law of God and the Works of God. It was also their desire that their meditations would be acceptable to God.¹³ We can see these aspects from the following Scriptures:

This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall *meditate* on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful (Josh. 1:8).

Happy [blessed] are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the LORD, *and on his law they meditate day and night*. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish (Ps. 1:1–6).

Let the words of my mouth and the *meditation* of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer (Ps. 19:14).

My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips when I think of you on my bed, and *meditate* on you in the watches of the night; for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me (Ps. 63:5–8).

I will *meditate* on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds (Ps. 77:12).

May my *meditation* be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the LORD (Ps. 104:34).

I will *meditate* on your precepts, and fix my eyes on your ways (Ps. 119:15).

Even though princes sit plotting against me, your servant will *meditate* on your statutes (Ps. 119:23).

Make me understand the way of your precepts, and I will *meditate* on your wondrous works (Ps. 119:27).

I revere your commandments, which I love, and I will *meditate* on your statutes (Ps. 119:48).

My eyes are awake before each watch of the night, that I may *meditate* on your promise (Ps. 119:148).

I remember the days of old, I think about all your deeds, I *meditate* on the works of your hands (Ps. 143:5).

In fact, the Psalms are a good place to start in order to meditate on the things of God and so be in the process of growing in the faith. Eugene Peterson quotes Augustine and Ambrose:

Augustine called the Psalms a 'school.' Ambrose provided a livelier metaphor, 'gymnasium': in we go for daily workouts,

¹² Packer, *Laid-back Religion?*, p. 66.

¹³ See Bingham, *The Christian Meditator*, pp. 39–45.

keeping ourselves in shape for a life of spirituality, fully *alive* human beings.¹⁴

No matter where we may start, at least let us carve out that time each day to be reading, meditating and praying over the word of God—knowing that the continuing good health of our spiritual life largely depends on it!

¹⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1992, p. 105.

11

Discipline and Bible Study—2

Meditation on the Scriptures requires a disciplined attitude of heart—learning to wait on God in order to hear him speak to us. We are always in so much of a rush that we rarely, if ever, stop to really contemplate and hear God speak. If he does not say something immediately in the few moments we have to spare him, then we are on our way! In a slightly different context but applicable here, A. W. Tozer wrote: ‘The tragedy is that our eternal welfare depends upon our hearing, and we have trained our ears not to hear’.¹

We must learn to wait on him and patiently dwell in his presence until he speaks. He, in fact, is waiting for us!

Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you. For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him (Isa. 30:18).

Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our help and shield (Ps. 33:20).

Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long (Ps. 25:5).

¹ Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, p. 77.

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope (Ps. 130:5).

For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him (Ps. 62:5).

... but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint (Isa. 40:31).

In relation to prayer (though also applicable to our reading the Bible), John Piper writes about God working for those who wait upon him:

To wait! That means to pause and soberly consider our own inadequacy and the Lord's all-sufficiency, and to seek counsel and help from the Lord, and to hope in him... The folly of not waiting for God is that we forfeit the blessing of having God work for us. The evil of not waiting for God is that we oppose God's will to exalt himself in mercy... Prayer is the essential activity of waiting for God.²

Geoffrey Bingham writes:

Hastiness of spirit will despise waiting and listening. These will be looked upon as impractical exercises. In fact, 'he that believeth shall not make haste', for he trusts God. One can hear but not be listening. We mean that such hearing is not really listening... Man, with his limited view of things, does not understand until he listens. Then the voice comes through and his meditations become useful and valid. Nevertheless he has to listen carefully. He has to distinguish between the voices that are not of God and those that are. He has to train himself to hear beyond the clamouring voices of impatient men, and threatening or seducing evil powers.³

² Piper, *Desiring God*, p. 146.

³ Bingham, *The Christian Meditator*, pp. 47–8.

Paul exhorts us to centre our attention on the things that really matter in life:

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, *think about these things*. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you (Phil. 4:8–9).

If our reading and meditation on the word of God is genuine, then it will always lead to right action. It will lead to obedience. Such obedience comes from true hearing:

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing (James 1:22–25).

Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty (Matt. 13:18–23).

The Bible is like light—it shines for a purpose. But like light, God's truth cannot be accumulated or hoarded! The

light of the truth must be *lived*—it must be obeyed—in order for truth to be manifested as truth and its light to be seen as it really is—the Light of God:

No one after lighting a lamp hides it under a jar, or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a lampstand, so that those who enter may see the light. For nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed, nor is anything secret that will not become known and come to light. Then pay attention to how you listen; for to those who have, more will be given; and from those who do not have, even what they seem to have will be taken away (Luke 8:16–18).

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven (Matt. 5:14–16).

The discipline of reading the word of God daily is with the view to hearing the truth of God and doing it—living it out in obedience—so that the world may see who the Father is and so glorify him. This places the responsibility on us to read and know the Scriptures intimately so that our lives may be a tangible reflection of its great truths. How many times have you said to yourself: ‘I really must get to know my Bible better’, but have done nothing about it? Perhaps that was five years ago and there has been little progress since.

The pagan world in which we live needs desperately to see Christ in us. Men and women and children need to know the reality of the Living God by seeing the truth of this God embodied in the way we conduct ourselves in the normal day-to-day activities of living. The only ‘Bible’ some people will ever ‘read’ will be us Christians! If we are not disciplined to ‘walk the walk’ and ‘live the life’

according to God’s word, then what they ‘read’ will be a distorted and lopsided understanding of the character of the Father—and it will not really be the truth at all. Paul spoke about his Christian converts in Corinth as being ‘living epistles’—their lives reflecting Christ through the operation of the Holy Spirit in them and through them:

You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts (2 Cor. 3:2–3).

Only the power and wonder of the word of God can transform our lives into a living testimony to the grace of God so that all will be able to ‘read’ us aright. That’s the goal in our daily discipline in studying and reading and meditating on the Scriptures.

‘But’, you ask, ‘how do I do it? I am so busy and there are so many demands on my time! How can I fit in this so-called ‘quiet time’ each day and not feel that I am shirking or compromising other responsibilities?’ Probably no one can tell you how to solve that tension! It will always be there to some degree. The only solution is to make a start. Work out what part of the day can be set aside for an undistracted time with the Lord and his word. (Remember the example of Hudson Taylor quoted in the previous chapter.)

For me, the best time is first thing in the morning, immediately after breakfast. If I set aside that time-slot then it seems to set the tone for the whole day. Of course, I can’t always do it, but generally I manage to set aside that special hour each morning. For others, the start of the day just does not work—they fall asleep again when they try to

read or pray first up. Some of my friends use their lunch hour. Others find the evening the best time. I know many who read their Bible on the train or bus and seem to be able to shut out all that is going on around them. Others find the noise at home too much and have to retreat to the car in the garage to have their fellowship with the Lord. There are no rules. Each person must find their own best way of meeting with God and being with him in his word each day. The main thing is to do it! Be disciplined and do not allow anything to deter you from the resolve to somehow carve out this time each day.

As we have already seen, the Bible is unlike any other book. But what should our approach be when we read it? When we read any other book we start at the beginning and read it right through, gaining an understanding of the author's plot or theme, and so coming to the conclusion. But most people never read the Bible like that. Because it consists of sixty-six individual books written by different authors and covering a huge range of styles and subject matter over a vast period of time, we treat it more like a collection of separate accounts. As a result we often just dip into it and read only those parts that seem to appeal to us. We have our small doses each day and not much more. We rarely read it right through to gain an overall picture. We never seem to gain an understanding of its great themes that begin in Genesis and are threads that run right through to Revelation. In that sense, some Christians have never really 'read' the Bible at all!

God wants us to read the Bible as a *book*—a single story with a single theme . . . the Bible comes to us as the product of a single mind, the mind of God. It proves its unity over and over again

by the amazing way it links together, one part throwing light on another part. So we should read it as a whole.⁴

For practical reasons, then, our reading of the Bible ought not to be without some systematic method of covering all parts of the Old and New Testaments over a set period of one, two or three years. If some definite study guide or almanac is not used, then we tend to read only the bits that really interest us. Large slabs of the Old Testament are usually neglected. Use Scripture Union notes or Robert McCheyne's almanac or something similar. If you do use notes, then find ones that stretch you out in your thinking and praying.

As you read the Scriptures each day, ask yourself questions such as these:

- What is the 'plot' of this book? What is its subject? What is it all about?
- What does this passage teach me about the character of God?
- What does it teach me about myself?
- Does this show me something of the grace, love, mercy and forgiveness of God?
- What great *principle* relating to the truth does this passage show me?
- Is there an example for me to follow, a command to obey, an error to avoid?
- Is there any sin for me to forsake, a promise to claim?
- How may this passage be used as a basis for prayer?

⁴ Packer, *Laid-back Religion?*, p. 17.

It is also a great discipline to record the things God shows you each day from his word. Have a note book or a file on your computer in which you date and document the specific truths or lessons that you have come to see as you've been reading and meditating on the Scriptures during your 'quiet time' that day. One writer gives the following advice:

... by writing down what God teaches us in our Quiet Time we not only receive a deeper impression of the lessons learned, but we also have a permanent record to which we can refer later.⁵

For many, this becomes an invaluable spiritual journal which helps them trace and review their pilgrimage as a Christian over many years. In my own case, I started keeping a journal when I was thirteen but when I came to know Christ in 1957 it became a record of my journey as a believer. I have recorded the things I discovered from the Scriptures, the events in my life that have been milestones in my spiritual growth, and those significant occasions when I have had to face hard times and learn what the Lord was saying to me at that point in my pilgrimage. I sometimes go back and re-read those entries of years ago and am amazed at what I have written! For example, in 1968 I had been poring over Romans chapter 6, trying to understand what Paul was saying. I wrote at the time:

As I've studied Romans six, light has burst in and opened up these passages in a way that has brought transformation and renewal. As yet, I cannot fully understand all that has happened, and only slowly am I beginning to be able to express in words what I have begun to see. But the truth is, sin's power has been broken, really for the first time in my life, and I now know that I

need never serve sin again. I'm not saying I won't, but I see *I need not*.

This realization in itself has broken its power. Great peace and joy have come as a result, and the word of God has opened up in so many places and become clear in a new way. Really, all that I have begun to see should have been known years ago, but sad to say, no one seems to be teaching these things.

Seeing for the first time that I am now 'in Christ' has been the revolutionising truth. For years I've thought I understood the Cross in its legal side and the cancellation of guilt, but now I realise that I didn't really understand at all, because all that the Cross is and means only becomes really relevant to my every day experience when I see that I am 'in Christ'. His death is *my* death, his resurrection is *my* resurrection. So sin and death and law and guilt, none of these have any claim upon me because they have no claim upon him, and I am 'in him'!

My conscience is utterly at rest in this fact, and sin has lost its title and power to reign in me. Sin still dwells in me I know, but I no longer need serve sin. I *can* serve sin in the sense that I am able to, but I need not. Indeed, as Paul says: 'How shall I sin?' I seek therefore daily to reckon myself to be dead; not reckon myself into being dead, but reckon on the fact that I am dead (to sin). Why? Because Christ died and I am in him. This reckoning is not a work, it is faith in the finished work of Christ upon the Cross.

In and of myself I have absolutely no strength or power not to sin. I don't want to, but I can't prevent it. God has not eradicated all remaining vestiges of sin, and so Romans seven will always be true of the Christian. However, God has not left me to stand against sin *in and of myself*, and it is by the Spirit that I am to put to death the deeds of the body. This is only possible when I see that all that I am is 'in Christ', and that I have died 'in him' and risen 'in him', and that sin, though present in all its power, has absolutely no right whatever to rule over me or dominate me. Left to myself (as a believer) I stand no chance at all. Sin will

⁵ Anderson, *The Quiet Time*, p. 30.

always win. But praise God, I am not left to myself! I am 'in Christ' and all the power of his Spirit is there to subdue and mortify sin.

Once the finished work of Christ is really seen, then the true ground is laid for appropriation. Until then, appropriation always fails, thus leaving one terribly confused and bewildered, and, I think, sometimes shattered.

There is no deeper truth, no higher doctrine than the Cross, and I find I must constantly go back to the finished work because not only is that the ground for my justification but it is also the one and only ground for my sanctification. Even as the appropriation of the benefits of Christ's death for justification were by faith, so too, are the benefits of the Cross appropriated by faith for daily sanctification. Everything stems from the Cross, and therefore everything is in Christ. Nothing is apart from him.

Finally, it is of enormous benefit to memorise key verses of Scripture. These are for our own benefit as well as for others. The Psalmist said, 'I treasure [lay up, store] your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you' (Ps. 119:11). And Paul instructed, 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly' (Col. 3:16a).

Jesus often quoted the Scriptures from memory because he knew them through and through and had learned them from his youth. As we learn Scripture by heart, so we are storing up a vast memory-bank of truth which the Spirit of God will draw upon when least we expect it! It will become invaluable when we are speaking to others about the Lord, as he will bring to our remembrance passages which we may have memorised years before.

The Anglican Prayer Book has a simple prayer which could be helpful to use in setting the tone of our expectation each time we come to read and meditate on the word of God:

Blessed Lord, you have caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning: grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that, encouraged and supported by your holy Word, we may embrace and always hold fast the joyful hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.⁶

⁶ *An Australian Prayer Book*, AIO Press, Sydney, 1978, pp. 181–2.

12

The Christian Conscience

It has been said of fallen, un-redeemed human beings that ‘a guilty conscience is the seasoning of our daily life’.¹ It is the conscience which provides a perpetual commentary on our activities, attitudes and responses to the moral demands of life. Of course, a multitude of factors will dictate whether or not that commentary is correct. Of this function of the conscience James Packer says:

It is a universal experience that conscience is largely autonomous in its operation; though sometimes we can suppress or stifle it, it normally speaks independently of our will, and sometimes, indeed, contrary to our will. And when it speaks, it is in a strange way distinct from us; it stands over us, addressing us with an absoluteness of authority which we did not give it and which we cannot take from it.²

The human conscience is ‘innate and universal. It is not the product of environment, training, habit, race impressions, or

education, though it is influenced by all of these factors.’³ It is this remarkable facility in all of us by which we have an awareness of what is right and wrong. The word ‘conscience’ means ‘a knowing together with’. In other words, it is a self-knowing in the moral realm about the rightness and wrongness of our thoughts, words and actions. Thus conscience ‘reports’ back to us about what we are thinking, saying and doing in relation to some known law or standard. Not only does the conscience refer to that which is external to us and arbitrates on our conduct by measuring it against that code or rule, but it also refers to the law within. It witnesses to that law of God which has been written on our hearts from creation. In that sense, then, the conscience is God’s deputy and vice-regent within us.

The conscience operates in four basic ways within us: (i) it urges us to do that which we regard to be right and to be restrained in doing that which we regard to be wrong; (ii) it passes judgment on us in our decisions, thoughts, words and actions; (iii) it brings a deep disquiet, shame and remorse to our inner being when we go against that which we know to be right; and (iv) it commends us when we have acted appropriately in any given moral decision according to our convictions regarding the truth. Thus our conscience can be a most valuable monitor, or it can be a terrible tyrant. It can either be our greatest friend or our greatest enemy.

If we are not clear about our relationship with God then our conscience is likely to bring us into a state of deep bondage:

¹ Tournier, *Guilt and Grace*, p. 10.

² J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, Crossway Books, Wheaton, 1990, p. 110.

³ Alfred M. Rehwinkel, ‘Conscience’ in *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1969, p. 136.

Many sensitive Christians limp through life because of a morbid and weak conscience whose condemning voice gives them no rest. Their very sincerity and desire to do the will of God only accentuate the problem and cause them to live in a state of perpetual self-accusation.⁴

Release from the accusing conscience is only possible by discovering through the Scriptures what Christ has done in taking all human guilt on the Cross. It is not good enough to say 'I live by my conscience' because our conscience cannot help us—it can never originate any action or deliverance. It offers no cure of its own! 'It is like a thermometer, which though detecting and indicating the temperature, never modifies or creates its own temperature.'⁵ Our conscience has no power to make us do right or cease doing wrong—all it can do is deliver a judgment on our thoughts, words and actions. It is then up to our will as to how we respond to that judgment. Charles Spurgeon said:

Conscience may tell me that something is wrong, but how wrong it is conscience itself does not know. Did any man's conscience, unenlightened by the Spirit, ever tell him that his sins deserved damnation? Did it ever lead any man to feel an abhorrence of sin as sin? Did conscience ever bring a man to such self-renunciation that he totally abhorred himself and all his works and came to Christ?⁶

The answer to all three questions is, of course, no!

It is the activity of the conscience which renders our sin culpable. If we had no conscience we could not be held accountable for our wrong. Thus it is our conscience which brings our guilt (false or otherwise) to the surface, whereas,

if we had no conscience we would not know the terrible effects of these guilts in our daily living:

... our guilt unseats us: we lose confidence because we have offended the law, evoked God's wrath, and so feel the curse of God in our consciences.⁷

Our guilty conscience often prohibits us from being honest with one another and forces us into compromising situations where we can't afford to own up to the truth. Thus William Shakespeare's saying is true that 'Conscience doth make cowards of us all'.⁸ Because of our moral guilt we hide our true feelings even from those who are closest to us. Our conscience, though it may be ignored, cannot be silenced. Though our conscience may be dulled, it cannot be stopped. When we are guilty, our conscience testifies against us and keeps us in a constant state of disease.

But is our conscience always right in its judgments? As we saw above, conscience arbitrates on the basis of the information available. Thus it becomes imperative that our conscience be informed aright—it has to be instructed in the truth. Oswald Sanders illustrates this principle:

A Hindu once said to a British Administrator: 'Our conscience tells us it is right to burn our widows on the pyre of their husbands.'

'Yes,' replied the officer, 'and our conscience tells us it is right to hang you if you do.'⁹

⁴ Sanders, *Problems of Christian Discipleship*, p. 45.

⁵ Sanders, *Problems of Christian Discipleship*, p. 46.

⁶ Spurgeon, *Spurgeon at His Best*, p. 39.

⁷ Geoffrey Bingham, *The Splendour of Holiness*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1985, p. 96.

⁸ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act III, scene 1, line 83. In the context Hamlet says that it is 'the dread of something after death' (line 78) which causes conscience to act as it does.

⁹ Sanders, *Problems of Christian Discipleship*, p. 47.

Our conscience must be rightly informed. It must know the truth about our relationship with God before it can make a correct judgment on our thoughts, words and actions.

When we came to faith in Christ, our guilt was entirely taken away. We were forgiven and cleansed. But if we have not really understood this fact, then our conscience may still cause us great difficulty. We may not have understood clearly what happened on the Cross when Christ was made to 'be sin' for us. We may not have realised that God's forgiveness is total and that all our past, present and future sin has been atoned for. If these things are not clear to us, then we will still be subject to the terrible results of a guilty conscience.

What we urgently need to understand is that God has already acted on our behalf to cleanse our conscience from evil—for only he can bring peace to the troubled conscience. The Puritan writer William Gurnall said:

Conscience demands as much to satisfy it as God himself does to satisfy him for the wrong that we have done him. Nothing can take off the conscience from accusing but that which takes off God from threatening.¹⁰

If we were not guilty creatures our conscience would have nothing to say to us. We would enjoy a beautiful tranquillity and peace. That's why, for the Christian, God has done an amazing thing. He has taken away all grounds for the conscience to accuse. He has removed our guilt, he has acquitted us, and he has brought cleansing to our heart and mind and conscience.

¹⁰ Quoted by Geoffrey Bingham in a 1962 teaching mission at St Lukes, Thornleigh, NSW.

The writer of Hebrews says of the death of Jesus:

How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God! (Heb. 9:14).

'Dead works' are self-justifying deeds which we do in order to buy God off. But the writer of Hebrews goes on to tell us that, as a result of Christ's action on the Cross, we can approach God 'with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water' (Heb. 10:22).

Until such time as that cleansing comes to us, God views all our endeavours as impure, and the commentary which our conscience gives is therefore an 'evil report' as far as he is concerned. That's why it is dangerous for someone to say that they just 'follow their conscience'! The human conscience is not a good guide by which to assess whether we are on the right track or not. The conscience that has been consistently ignored can become dull and that person no longer 'hears' what is being said. 'As long as a man is unregenerate, his conscience oscillates between being bad and being asleep.'¹¹

In the previous two chapters we talked about the word of God. Through the instrumentality of the Spirit, God's truth has come to us as a revelation, and thus we have now been given completely new information about moral realities. We did not know these things before we were converted, but as the Spirit of God has brought us to faith, so

¹¹ Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, p. 114.

we have become aware of his truth and of the way things really are. *This is an entirely new arena for our conscience!* It now refers to the truth of God's written word, not, say, just to the current standards of our society or culture. As such, our minds are being informed in a new way as to how we ought to think, speak and act. We gain knowledge of the truth as we study the Scriptures and as we grow in our comprehension of what is appropriate and what is not appropriate now that we are believers.

It now becomes a matter of disciplined obedience for us to respond to the truth according to this new information available to our conscience. Once again it is not automatic. We can decide to go against the new voice of our conscience and head down the wrong path in wilful disobedience—even though this can have disastrous results:

If we persist in some action against which conscience has witnessed we thereby defile it and thus prevent its faithful functioning. When a watch stops, it is not the fault of the watch but of the dust which has clogged its delicate mechanism. So with conscience, especially in the realm of purity. 'To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure; their very minds and consciences are corrupted' (Titus 1:15). Failure to heed the voice of conscience is fraught with serious consequences.¹²

Thus Paul warned of those believers who had suffered 'shipwreck in the faith' (1 Tim. 1:19). By constantly ignoring their conscience they had been unable to maintain any integrity in their walk of faith, and so had backslidden and fallen away. He also spoke of others whose consciences were 'seared' (1 Tim. 4:2). They had refused to

¹² Sanders, *Problems of Christian Discipleship*, p. 49.

heed the warnings of their conscience and gradually it had become so dull and dead that they could no longer 'hear' what it was saying.

Paul taught his young friend Timothy to take great care to maintain a 'clear conscience' (1 Tim. 3:9)—to not allow anything to muddy or pollute his conscience. As such Paul was able to quote from his own experience, 'Therefore I do my best always to have a clear conscience toward God and all people' (Acts 24:16).

For Paul, the attaining of a conscience void of offence was a matter of constant exercise—he had a gymnasium for his soul! In speaking about the value of the conscience, Charles Spurgeon remarked:

He was a fool who killed the watchdog because it alarmed him when thieves were breaking into his house. If conscience upbraids you, feel its upbraiding and heed its rebuke. It is your best friend.¹³

Mrs Spurgeon recalled her husband saying to her: 'You may write my life across the sky, I have nothing to conceal'.¹⁴ Such a claim could only come from a disciplined man whose conscience was devoid of fault before God and man.

The Psalmists had great insights into the workings of conscience and often spoke of their own sufferings as the result of their guilt—especially in the light of God's wrath:

While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer (Ps. 32:3-4).

¹³ Spurgeon, *Spurgeon at His Best*, p. 40.

¹⁴ C. H. Spurgeon, *C. H. Spurgeon: The Early Years 1834-1859*, The Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1962, p. 277.

O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger, or discipline me in your wrath. For your arrows have sunk into me, and your hand has come down on me. There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin. For my iniquities have gone over my head; they weigh like a burden too heavy for me. My wounds grow foul and fester because of my foolishness; I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all day long I go around mourning. For my loins are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh. I am utterly spent and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart (Ps. 38:1–8).

Unlike the Psalmists of old, we moderns have lost sight of the fact that our consciences are always being exposed to God's word—whether it be that written on our hearts or as documented in the Scriptures. We fail to see that many of our mental ills and spills arise from an uncleansed conscience kept on edge by the word of God pressing up against us day by day.

Moreover, what we don't seem to realise is that 'nothing will satisfy the conscience of man which does not first satisfy the conscience of God'.¹⁵ God's 'conscience', as far as our sin and guilt is concerned, has been satisfied entirely by his Son's sacrifice on the Cross. Therefore *our* conscience *must* be satisfied. We must know that God's threatening (which once alarmed our conscience because of our just liability for judgment) has been taken away at the Cross. His threatening has ceased. Because we are now in Christ we can have peace at the level of our conscience. Our guilt has been taken by Christ and our conscience can now be at complete rest as far as

¹⁵ P. T. Forsyth. Quoted by Geoffrey Bingham in a 1962 teaching mission at St Lukes, Thornleigh, NSW.

future judgment is concerned. Our consciousness of the hold evil once had over us has gone. We are at peace.

Because we now have a conscience that has been cleansed we need to make every effort to keep it clear. We do so by avoiding evil, by obeying our Lord, and by living with others in a manner that honours God. *That takes discipline and effort!*

Think through the following verses:

Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame (1 Pet. 3:16).

... how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God! (Heb. 9:14).

... let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water (Heb. 10:22).

For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience (Rom. 13:5).

While Paul was looking intently at the council he said, 'Brothers, up to this day I have lived my life with a clear conscience before God' (Acts 23:1).

Therefore I do my best always to have a clear conscience toward God and all people (Acts 24:16).

But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith (1 Tim. 1:5).

... fight the good fight, having faith and a good conscience. By rejecting conscience, certain persons have suffered shipwreck in the faith (1 Tim. 1:18–19).

I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience (2 Tim. 1:3).

In his book *A Quest for Godliness*, James Packer has a chapter entitled ‘The Puritan Conscience’. He traces the Puritan understanding of the importance of a ‘good’ conscience in the life of the believer.

To them, there could be no real spiritual understanding, nor any genuine godliness, except as men exposed and enslaved their consciences to God’s word.¹⁶

As such, Christians ought to be noted for their integrity, for their goodness, for their honesty, and for their concern for the moral and spiritual welfare of others. James Packer calls us to consider how, in Western society today, the conscience is in decay. He urges us to go back to the Reformers and to the Puritans to see how much they lived with a deep awareness of the importance of the conscience being daily subject to the Lordship of Christ.

This means we must have a high view of the Holy Scriptures and be constantly aware of our need to subject our conscience to God and to him alone. Packer shows that it is imperative we get our consciences fully attuned to the mind and will of God—otherwise we can’t help going wrong, no matter what we do. Flouting conscience or

following an erring conscience are equally disastrous. He goes on to talk about a good conscience being a tender one:

The degree of sharp-sightedness which our consciences show in detecting our own real sins (as distinct from the imaginary ones on which Satan encourages us to concentrate) is an index of how well we really know God and how close to him we really walk—an index, in other words, of the real quality of our spiritual life. The sluggish conscience of a ‘sleepy’, ‘drowsy’ saint is a sign of spiritual malaise. The healthy Christian is not necessarily the extrovert, ebullient Christian, but the Christian who has a sense of God’s presence stamped deep on his soul, who trembles at God’s word, who lets it dwell in him richly by constant meditation upon it, and who tests and reforms his life daily in response to it. We can begin to assess our real state in God’s sight by asking ourselves how much exercise of conscience along these lines goes into our own daily living.¹⁷

Packer then quotes a wonderful statement from John Owen:

... if the word [of God] do not dwell with power *in us*, it will not pass with power *from us*.¹⁸

Our day-to-day living will take on new dimensions as we endeavour to live in the good of God’s word and so ensure that our conscience is always maintained clear and pure in his sight. Holiness (or godliness) is a power for living which flows from a life lived in the truth. In that light we give light. In that holiness we speak with a holy authority. In that godliness we convey to the pagan world around us the truth of God’s character and the reality of knowing and living in his presence each day.

¹⁶ Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, p. 107.

¹⁷ Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, p. 116.

¹⁸ Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, p. 117.

None of this is possible without the discipline of obedience and the will to have a conscience that is void of offence before God and man (Acts 24:16).

Let me conclude with what a friend of mine wrote when he read this chapter in draft form:

I would suggest that my definition of conscience is something like ‘that faculty which registers the consistency of our thoughts and actions against that which we know to be right’. From that angle, I could argue that the unconverted person may seem to be at peace because he or she has substituted another standard (as in Rom. 1:23, 25; etc.) which is your Hindu example. Being born again means being a ‘new creation’ so that the law of God which was written on the heart at creation is again the standard against which our purified conscience can register consistency or otherwise. That is why I like the idea of a ‘sensitive’ conscience. The word of God keeps us up against the true standard, so that conscience can always give a true reading. If my conscience registers inconsistency, I should therefore be deeply grateful and do something about it. My problem is that, even as a Christian, I still tend to want to change the standard, to ‘filter out the truth’ was the way you put it once, I think. Or, as I have recently discovered, if the scales in the bathroom tell me I am too heavy, don’t lose weight, change the scales!

13

Disciplined Praying—1

If the need to be disciplined in regular private reading and meditation on the Scriptures is an uphill battle for many of us, then being disciplined in private prayer is probably harder still! Charles Spurgeon once confessed that he usually felt more dissatisfied with his prayers than with anything else he did.¹ But prayer is indispensable to a healthy Christian life. Discipline in prayer is one of the tangible evidences of our dependence upon the Lord:

We may assent to the fact that we are dependent on Christ, but if our prayer life is meagre or perfunctory, we thereby deny it. We are in effect saying we can handle most of our spiritual life with our own self-discipline and our perceived innate goodness. Or perhaps we are saying we are not even committed to the pursuit of holiness.²

Prayer expresses our relationship with the Father and is the means by which we enter into rich communion with him. Prayer is two-way—it is dialogue. It is a conversation between us and our Lord. We speak to him and he speaks to us. Prayer is certainly far more than just presenting our

¹ Spurgeon, *Spurgeon at His Best*, p. 143.

² Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace*, p. 137.

‘shopping list’ of wants to him! It is the means by which we accomplish all that God has for us to do! I believe it was Martin Luther who said: ‘I have so much to do today that I shall never get through it with less than three hours’ prayer’. In that case, praying is a saving of time!

Back in Eden, Adam and Eve enjoyed wonderful fellowship and communion with the Father as they walked in the garden in the cool of the evening. There was genuine dialogue. There was wonderful sharing. There was rich oneness in their relationship so that they knew the mind of the Lord and were content to do and be all that he desired of them as those in his image. In that untainted relationship with the Father they were able to draw on him for all the resources they needed in order to be true creatures—true human beings. Their full identity as true persons was bound up in their dependence upon him to breathe life into their souls moment by moment.

Satan’s seductive lie was for them to abandon that relationship in favour of an independent life lived outside fellowship with the Almighty. He convinced our first parents that they could go it alone and get away with it. They came to believe that they did not really need God’s immediate presence or his Spirit in order to get on in life. It was a disastrous lie with dreadful eternal consequences. The day in which they disobeyed they died—they died in their relationship with the Father. They no longer wanted to be near him or to hear his voice. They were ashamed and afraid. They came into deep, deep guilt in relation to their Maker because they were no longer functioning as the creatures he had made them to be.

That’s the position we all came into the moment we were born, because when Adam died to God, so too did

we! But what we don’t seem to realise is that God has nevertheless built into all of us the drive and capacity to pray. We *must* pray—just as we must breathe. As human beings—fallen though we are—it is impossible for us not to pray. Because of how God has made us, we can’t be ourselves so long as we are autonomous. At our depths we are uncomfortable in self-ruling and desire some lord or leader to whom we may give our allegiance. Thus, if we do not have converse with God as he really is, then we will resort to our idols—to our surrogate gods—and have discourse with them! Of course, it will be perverted prayer, but prayer nevertheless. The truth is, whether we recognise it or not, we all pray to our Maker. Geoffrey Bingham puts it this way:

Sinful, rebellious, foolish or atheistic, He is their Creator. In practical fact all human beings pray to God, although many would not recognize Him as God, that is they have dialogue with Him, whether in adoration and joy or in anger and rebellion. We may put it this way, ‘By creation all human creatures have *union* with God, the Creator-creature union, but only those who have the grace of redemption have *communion* with Him’.³

When we came to faith in Christ—when we were redeemed and born again—we came into a new relationship with the Father. Whereas we were born devoid of his Spirit (Jude 1:19), this wonderful gift has now been restored. The Spirit of Life has again flooded our beings so that once more we have access to God’s presence and are now able to pray aright. The way is now open for us to enter again into true communion with our Lord. As we meditate on his word, that leads us to meditate on him, his character, his works

³ Geoffrey Bingham, *Come Let Us Pray*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1988, p. 2.

and so to enter into true dialogue with him. The Holy Spirit authors within us that wonderful cry, ‘Abba, Father’—and thus we give expression to our new relationship as sons and daughters of the true Father (Rom. 8:15–17; Gal. 4:6).

Picture for a moment the relationship between a human father and his newborn son. What a joy for him to have a little boy. What a wonder is this tiny new life! The father’s joy is unbounded as he witnesses the miracle of birth and the pleasure of holding this little one in his arms for the first time. Months go by and the babe grows. The father has so much to communicate to his offspring. He has so much to teach him. There is so much for the boy to learn from his loving dad. But as months become years it is clear that something is dreadfully wrong. The boy will not speak to his father! He chatters away happily to others, but not to his dad. For his part, the father is constantly speaking to his much-loved son, but there is no response! There is no communion. There is no dialogue. From every point of view it’s a tragedy—for the son, as much as for the father.

We all recognise that it is *natural* for a child to converse with its parent. And it is equally natural for a newborn believer to converse with God. The story above is only a weak illustration of what it would be like for the Christian who did not talk to his/her heavenly Father. Nevertheless prayer is a battle and we have to work at it. We should keep in mind P. T. Forsyth’s words: ‘The worst sin is prayerlessness . . . Not to want to pray, then, is the sin behind sin. And it ends in not being able to pray . . . To feed the soul we must toil at prayer.’⁴

We are made for fellowship, communion and dialogue with the Father. Not to pray and converse with him is unthinkable. And yet somehow we often find it hard to enter into a meaningful, regular prayer life with God our Father. Why is this? Apart from being undisciplined, it is probably because our best intentions and efforts are always being contested. The enemy does not want us talking to the Father! He will put distractions in our way and make sure we are too tired or too busy to pray. He will convince us that it is too early or too late to pray. He will find other things to occupy our minds. He will put ideas into our heads that we suddenly think have priority. The phone will ring, the dinner must be prepared, the cat should be fed! These and a multitude of distractions come upon us just when we have resolved to pray. That’s why we need to be wise in selecting a time that is best for us and less likely to be subject to these diversions. Take the phone off the hook, feed the cat first! There is always a way to do it. There is always some place and time that will suffice. But it will not happen unless we take our need seriously and are disciplined in making the time each day to pray. John and Charles Wesley’s mother, Susannah, had 19 children. In order to find a place where she could pray without distraction, she would sit in a corner with her apron over her head!

But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you (Matt. 6:6).

During one of my business trips to China, my young interpreter came to faith in Christ. We were able to correspond for a while, and in one letter she said that the only place she could be alone to converse with the Lord was on

⁴ P. T. Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1999, pp. 11–12.

her bed inside her mosquito net! She lived in a communist university dorm where religion was banned and privacy was virtually impossible. But she nevertheless found a way to be 'alone' and pray each day to her new-found heavenly Father.

As we saw in chapter 3, Jesus was a disciplined man of prayer. If *he* needed to be alone with the Father, then how much more do we? If he constantly found it necessary to deliberately put aside times for prayer and fasting, then how much more do we? If he could not carry on his ministry without constant recourse to prayer, then how much more do we have that need? God *calls* us to pray. He *desires* our communion! He *loves* to have us pray to him! He *yearns* that we—his much-loved children—might come to him daily in conversation and fellowship. He *seeks* for men and women who will walk with him. There is little doubt that the men and women who have been most used by God are the ones who have spent the most time with him alone in prayer. In the case of Jesus, the constant pressure of duty was not the signal for more sleep but for more prayer.

So, then, though prayer to God may be the natural response to our new relationship with him, it is still not automatic. In other words, like every other area of our Christian walk it requires discipline and effort and resolve. Just as we need to make time to read the Scriptures regularly, so too we need to make space for undistracted prayer. God does not say to us: 'Be holy when you feel like it'—he knows we are weak and *commands* us to be holy. God does not say: 'Love me and others when you feel like it'—he knows we are weak and so *commands* us to love. Nor does God say: 'Pray when you feel like it and have a few moments to spare'—he knows we are weak, and so he

graciously *commands* us to pray! And if he commands, then we can and must obey:

[He commands] Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me (Ps. 50:15).

[He commands] Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak (Matt. 26:41).

[He commands] Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened (Matt. 7:7–8).

[He commands] Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man (Luke 21:36).

[He commands] Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you (1 Thess. 5:16–18).

Discipline in prayer flows out of grace. Spurgeon even went so far as to call prayer 'the thermometer of grace'.⁵ We will want to pray when we see the mercy he has shown us in Christ. Gratitude of heart will soon give expression in thanksgiving and worship of our wonderful Lord:

The more we pray, the more we shall want to pray. The more we pray, the more we can pray. The more we pray, the more we shall pray. He who prays little, will pray less, but he who prays much will pray more. And he who prays more, will desire to pray more abundantly.⁶

⁵ Spurgeon, *Spurgeon at His Best*, p. 144.

⁶ Spurgeon, *Spurgeon at His Best*, p. 143.

Nevertheless, prayer will always be a battle and we will never feel that we are much good at it. That's why the Scriptures urge us on to pray and not to become discouraged:

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart (Luke 18:1).

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone (1 Tim. 2:1).

Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:16).

Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man (Luke 21:36).

The battle for prayer is one that takes place within the great cosmic battle between Satan and the purposes of God. Geoffrey Bingham writes:

Perhaps modern man thinks, naturally, that he is in some demilitarized zone. He may recognize that some kind of warfare is going on, but because he is a naturalist he cannot accept the idea that it is supernatural warfare. Any thought of prayer is vague, an unconscious crossing of themselves as protection from personal danger. It is shaped in the terms of 'fate' or 'luck'. Bereft of genuine dialogue with God, prayer—if it may be called that—is only for themselves. If they pray then prayer is vague, and at the best self-protective and self-extending.⁷

For the Christian, however, this battle is very real. There is no 'demilitarized zone' but only a huge war going on

between the forces of evil and the power of God. Whether we like it or not, we are part of that conflict. The moment we came to faith in Christ, we too were plunged into the battle! The fact is, all human beings are engaged in the battle whether they recognise it or not. It is the Christian who has consciously *changed sides*. It is essential therefore that we understand what is happening, and be disciplined so as to be able to take our right place in the fight:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints (Eph. 6:10–18).

Notice that *we do not have to do the fighting!* All we are commanded to do is 'stand'! Having prepared ourselves for the battle, we are made strong by standing in the strength of Christ the Victor. We do not have to wage any warfare against the powers of darkness—that has all been done on the Cross. What we do is stand in the conquest that Christ has already won back there at Calvary! How does that work out in practice? Geoffrey Bingham puts it this way:

⁷ Bingham, *Come Let Us Pray*, p. 30.

This battle is not merely some action conceived and played out only in the mind. The humblest believer who is apt in worship and adept in prayer can break down the citadels of evil powers, and gain their spoil for his Lord and himself. He does this without *hubris*, i.e. without human pride in his abilities, and without trust in his own powers. This simple person is one with God, and—as such—‘not unaware of Satan’s devices’. In prayer and worship he has weapons which transcend those of evil powers. This may be difficult to believe until we realize that holy love defeats the mindless evil of men and fallen celestial powers. Nothing, ultimately, can stand against holy and loving intercessory prayer.⁸

Prayer is essential in order that we might know the will of God. Christians need God’s guidance day by day, but are often slack in seeking him in order to know what he wants them to do with their lives. Paul said, ‘So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is’ (Eph. 5:17).

We must know the will of the Lord so that we might *pray* according to that will and so that we might *live* according to that will. Of course, we primarily know God’s will through the Scriptures, but the personal, immediate details of God’s will for us will usually become clear only as we enter into definite and disciplined prayer to the Father:

Of course we do not know every detail of His will, but we can apply to Him to know His present immediate will for us. This exercise may be more unconscious than conscious so that as we go, we know, and as we know, we go. Even so we need to ‘pray without ceasing’, for ‘men ought always to pray and not to faint’. In practice we must abide in Christ and walk in the Spirit so that we really have the mind of Christ, and so by means of these practices know the Father’s will.⁹

⁸ Bingham, *Come Let Us Pray*, pp. 31–2.

⁹ Bingham, *Come Let Us Pray*, p. 42.

We all sense our terrible weakness when it comes to prayer and we are often at a loss as to know how to pray or what to pray. But Paul says an amazing thing in Romans chapter 8:

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God (Rom. 8:26–27).

When we pray it is the Spirit praying. When we are distressed in not really knowing how to pray or what to pray, the Spirit himself intercedes with groanings which cannot be put into words. He searches the depths of our heart and he knows what we would pray if we could! What we are incapable of doing through our human weakness he accomplishes—*as if it were coming from us!*¹⁰

The Holy Spirit dwells in our depths and knows us through and through. He is in us and we are in him. He knows we have no resources of our own, but he also knows that we are not on our own! He dwells in us in order that we will *not* be weak. In him, we are *not* evil; in him we are *not* fleshly. He has made us to be one with him! It is the Holy Spirit who makes intercession for the saints, according to the will of God—and that intercession is counted as *our* intercession for the saints, according to the will of God! I take it this is what Paul means when he urges us to ‘Pray in the Spirit at all times’ (Eph. 6:18).

Peter Jeffery talks about what it means to pray in the Spirit:

¹⁰ Paul uses the word ‘astheneia’ (from which we get our English word ‘asthenic’) in Romans 8:26 indicating our utter weakness and inability to pray as we ought out of our own supposed resources.

Running the Race

To pray in the Spirit means that the prayer is not a mere mouthing of words, empty, dry and formal. It is quite the opposite. There is warmth, reality, passion and power. This is because the Holy Spirit creates the prayer in our heart and mind. You are not then praying out of sense of duty or even desire, but the petitions are given by the Spirit. Not only does the Holy Spirit give the content of the prayer, but He also gives the power and ability to pray it.¹¹

And in this regard Dr D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes:

Is there anything on earth which is more wonderful than freedom in prayer? Do you delight in it, do you rejoice in it? When you are suddenly given freedom—you may have been struggling in prayer, finding it difficult to concentrate, finding it difficult to gather your thoughts as it were to make contact—suddenly there is a freedom given you. Have you not noticed it also in public prayer? You have been stumbling, you have been halting, you have been praying as you should in your mind, you have been ordering your thoughts, you have been gathering your petitions. It is all right, we must do that. But that is only the framework, that is the scaffolding, and you do not stop with that. Suddenly the Spirit comes and you are taken out of yourself, and the words pour out of you and you know that you are speaking to Him, and there is an exchange taking place. You are in the realm of the Spirit and enjoying something of the glorious liberty of the children of God.¹²

In his weakness Paul acknowledged that his strength came entirely from the Lord—and he was happy to boast in the fact:

... but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

Disciplined Praying-1

Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor. 12:9–10).

For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me (Col. 1:29).

For he [Jesus] was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God (2 Cor. 13:4).

In the midst of our own innate frailty we need to be disciplined in prayer!

¹¹ Peter Jeffery, *Walk Worthy*, pp. 34–5.

¹² Dr D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, quoted by Peter Jeffery, *Walk Worthy*, pp. 35–6.

Disciplined Praying—2

The more we are disciplined in prayer, so the more we enter into the heart of God. Yes, ‘the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak’—as the disciples discovered when they accompanied Jesus to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:41). Nevertheless, we must learn to persevere and not give up! Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

It is one of the particular difficulties of meditation that our thoughts are likely to wander and go their own way, toward other persons or to some events in our life. Much as this may distress and shame us again and again, we must not lose heart and become anxious, or even conclude that meditation is really not something for us. When this happens it is often a help not to snatch back our thoughts convulsively, but quite calmly to incorporate into our prayer the people and the events to which our thoughts keep straying and thus in all patience return to the starting point of the meditation.¹

The Bible encourages us to come to the Lord with boldness in our praying. This is spoken of in Hebrews 4 where the basis of our confidence in prayer is none other than Jesus himself—our high priest—who is able to both identify and

sympathise with us in every respect as we struggle in prayer:

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:14–16).

Commenting on this passage Spurgeon said:

Prayer pulls the rope below and the great bell rings above in the ears of God. Some scarcely stir the bell, for they pray so languidly. Others give but an occasional pluck at the rope. But he who wins with heaven is the man who grasps the rope boldly and pulls continuously, with all his might.²

It is good to develop the habit of using the Scriptures in our praying. Take Psalm 119 as an example. In all but a few of its 176 verses the writer refers to the word of God under its various titles—the law of the Lord, his ordinances, his statutes, his precepts, his commandments. He pours out his heart in the desire to be obedient to God’s revealed will. He prays that he will observe God’s truth and so be found faithful. We ought to learn to take up such verses and pray them as our own:

Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes, and I will observe it to the end. Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart. Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it. Turn my heart to your decrees,

¹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 75.

² Spurgeon, *The Quotable Spurgeon*, p. 178.

and not to selfish gain. Turn my eyes from looking at vanities; give me life in your ways. Confirm to your servant your promise, which is for those who fear you. Turn away the disgrace that I dread, for your ordinances are good. See, I have longed for your precepts; in your righteousness give me life (Ps. 119:33–40).

Each time we come to read the Scriptures we could pray the prayer of Psalm 119:18, ‘Open my eyes, so that I may behold wondrous things out of your law’. When we need to prepare for the likelihood of specific temptations coming on us we could pray the following:

I treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you. Blessed are you, O LORD; teach me your statutes. With my lips I declare all the ordinances of your mouth. I delight in the way of your decrees as much as in all riches. I will meditate on your precepts, and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word (Ps. 119:11–16).

Jerry Bridges writes about meditation, discipline and dependence on the Lord:

The psalmist stored up God’s Word in his heart. He recounted it to others, he rejoiced in obeying it, he meditated on it, delighted in it, and he did not neglect it. The psalmist was not only a man of discipline but also a man of prayer. His discipline did not cause him to neglect prayer for God to work, nor did his prayer cause him to neglect his own work. He practiced discipline *and* dependence.³

Our times of prayer and Bible reading ought to be consistent each day. As we discussed in the previous chapters, each of us ought to try and find that time of day which best accommodates our other responsibilities. A mother with

young children may find it virtually impossible to have a ‘quiet time’ early in the morning. The same may apply to the shift worker. Nevertheless, being alone with the Lord at some time during the day ought to have priority.

I was very moved when I read the extraordinary story of Ivan Moiseyev, a young Moldavian Christian who entered the Soviet Red Army knowing full well that he would be faced with an atheistic regime which not only outlawed any religious belief but rigorously persecuted any who would not toe the party line. No wonder his need to be alone with the Lord was on his mind the very first day:

The important thing, Ivan was thinking as he made his way to the dining hall, *is to find a place to pray*. Already the crowd of soldiers, the noise in the barracks, the difficulty in being alone pressed upon him.⁴

Ivan was able to find a small unused office where he could escape to pray each day. He knew that he could not survive unless he could be alone with God. His determination to be disciplined and faithful to his Lord impacted thousands in his country even though he suffered ruthless persecution and incarceration which eventually cost him his life.

A similar account of discipline under adverse conditions comes from Harold Morris who was charged (falsely as it happened) with murder and theft, and imprisoned in an American jail. While in prison he came to faith in Christ and his life radically changed. He too sought prayer as a daily priority, but how could he be alone with God in death row? He later said:

It’s not easy living a Christian life behind prison bars. The noise is unbearable, and privacy nonexistent. I didn’t know how to

³ Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace*, p. 139.

⁴ Myrna Grant, *Vanya*, Creation House, Altamonte Springs, 1974, p. 32.

pray, but whenever I felt confused, I went to the shower and talked with God. It became a daily habit—seeking power in the shower! In the only privacy I could find, I emptied my heart to the Father. Others heard about my quiet place and soon joined me; together we learned about prayer.⁵

The urgent priority which drove Ivan and Harold ought to characterise our lives too. None of us are likely to be unjustly treated as they were. Probably none of us will have to face such privations as they endured. But if they found the time and place to pray each day, cannot we? Setting aside time every day for this vital communion with our Lord was a priority for them and it should be for us too.

It is my experience that many people find first thing in the morning the most appropriate and valuable time for prayer. The business of the day has not begun and so one's first thoughts are for the Lord and what he wishes to say to us, and what he would have us say to him. Perhaps you find it hard to get up early. Is it that you go to bed too late? It has been said that 'Late nights are the relentless enemy of the Quiet Time . . . The victory of 6 a.m. is won at 10 p.m.!'⁶

As the following Scriptures indicate, there is something special about coming to the Lord at the beginning of each day.

O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I plead my case to you, and watch (Ps. 5:3).

But I will sing of your might; I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the morning. For you have been a fortress for me and a refuge in the day of my distress (Ps. 59:16).

But I, O LORD, cry out to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you (Ps. 88:13).

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness (Lam. 3:22–23).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer gives some wise advice:

For Christians the beginning of the day should not be burdened and oppressed with besetting concerns for the day's work. At the threshold of the new day stands the Lord who made it. All the darkness and distraction of the dreams of night retreat before the clear light of Jesus Christ and his wakening Word. All unrest, all impurity, all care and anxiety flee before him. Therefore, at the beginning of the day let all distraction and empty talk be silenced and let the first thought and the first word belong to him to whom our whole life belongs.⁷

Let me encourage you to make the effort to set aside a special time each day during which your thoughts and attention are centred entirely on the Lord. If this has not been your habit, start with just five minutes each day. Make it the same time each day and try to stick with it no matter what. Then gradually increase that time as the routine becomes more firmly a part of your daily round. The ideal is to combine this prayer time with your Bible reading, and so to pray over what you have read that morning (or whenever it is that you take time to read the Scriptures). Don't be put off if you keep failing! Stay with the determination to make prayer an integral part of your daily activities. Always keep in mind that the Lord is wanting to hear your prayers to him. He longs to have you come to him in the fellowship of prayer.

⁵ Harold Morris, *Twice Pardoned*, Word Publishing, Waco, 1986, p. 90.

⁶ Anderson, *The Quiet Time*, p. 13.

⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 33.

Learn to pray to him during the day in the midst of your normal activities—while at work, in the train, walking down the street, before you meet those friends for lunch. Learn to include conversation with the Lord in all your conscious thinking and planning during the day. Talk to him about that difficult meeting you are about to attend. Commit to him that conversation you are about to have with the boss or the headmaster or the solicitor. Discuss with him the options in that new project that you are undertaking. Make prayer so much a part of your life that you consider the Lord to be walking there right beside you every moment. Make it a habit to be constantly in conversation with him! Recognise that this won't just happen! You will need to make the effort to think this way and so learn to be disciplined to act on this resolve day by day.

Most Christians find it hard to pray in front of others. But confidence in public prayer will flow out of our private praying. This is not to say that everyone must learn to pray in public or must indeed do so. But as we learn to pray to our Father 'in secret' so we are more likely to be able to pray publicly. As it is, corporate prayer is an important part of our Christian fellowship and worship. Most churches have some part of the service given over to prayer.⁸ This may be liturgical (the use of a Prayer Book) or more spontaneous. Whatever mode of praying is customary, the person praying ought to be alive to God and therefore praying from their heart and not just out of form or ritual. This too takes discipline. The same is true of prayer offered in our home groups and other corporate Bible studies.

When we pray with others, our prayers ought to (at least) *conclude* with an 'Amen'. This gives others the opportunity to concur with our prayer with the affirmation: 'May it be so!' When there is no Amen at the end, it is not clear to others that the prayer has finished and so no one can say 'Amen' with any degree of confidence!—the person praying may just be collecting their thoughts for another long petition! By contrast, there are those who like to affirm every sentence prayed by others by inserting their many 'Amens' along the way! There are no rules!

However, the *principle* of saying 'Amen' may be seen in Deuteronomy 27:15–26 where God set out the various commands that the people were to observe. As each was read out, they were to respond with a resounding AMEN! The same expression is seen throughout the Old Testament:

Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen,' lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground (Neh. 8:6).

Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. And let all the people say, 'Amen.' Praise the LORD! (Ps. 106:48).

The New Testament writers also said 'Amen' after their prayers as well as after certain statements concerning the character of God or after some affirmation of his purposes:

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen (Rom. 11:36).

The God of peace be with all of you. Amen (Rom. 15:33).

... to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen (Rom. 16:27).

⁸ I have been in some churches which do not have any prayer in their services.

Running the Race

For in him every one of God's promises is a 'Yes.' For this reason it is through him that we say the 'Amen,' to the glory of God (2 Cor. 1:20).

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen (Gal. 6:18).

Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen (Rev. 1:7).

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, 'To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!' And the four living creatures said, 'Amen!' And the elders fell down and worshiped (Rev. 5:13-14).

The one who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! (Rev. 22:20).

Our praying is always to be in the name of Jesus. Human beings offer millions of prayers to their 'gods' every moment of the day. But the Living God has decreed that the only way prayer can be effective is when it comes to him in the name of Jesus:

For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them (Matt. 18:20).

I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it (John 14:13-14).

You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name (John 15:16).

Disciplined Praying—2

On that day you will ask nothing of me. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete . . . On that day you will ask in my name (John 16:23-24, 26).

Praying in the name of Jesus is not some magic formula but a recognition that we have no rights of our own to come into the presence of the Father other than through the person of Christ. He is the Intercessor. He is the Mediator. He is our Advocate. He is the one who brings our prayers before the Father and so it is in his name that we pray:

Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6).

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous (1 John 2:1).

Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us (Rom. 8:34).

To open or close our prayers 'in Jesus' name' is therefore not just some outmoded formula or appendage that some older Christians use but which we younger ones don't really need to employ! It is a biblical principle which is intended to set our prayers in a right context and within an appropriate framework of faith. We could not pray at all if it were not for our great High Priest making intercession for us. We come to the Father only in and through the Son. It is in his name that we can come boldly before the throne of grace:

Consequently he [Jesus] is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them (Heb. 7:25).

Finally, to whom do we pray? Do we pray to God, to the Lord, to Jesus, to the Holy Spirit or to the Father? Clearly there is nothing wrong in praying with any one of these as the object of our thinking. But the Scriptures direct our attention to the Father as being the *primary* focus of our praying. Jesus came in order to induct us into the Father's presence and our praying ought essentially be to him rather than to Jesus or the Holy Spirit:

He [Jesus] said to them, 'When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come' (Luke 11:2).

The Holy Spirit authors within us the cry 'Abba, Father' as the inward sign that we belong to God—the Father. We have been brought into the family of God—we are his sons and daughters and he delights to have us come to him with our worship, our thanksgiving and with our requests. As his children, let us come to him with the desire to be in his presence, calling him 'Dear Father'—'Dear *heavenly* Father'.

15

Disciplined Worship

We may not have realised it, but God has *made* us for worship. Just as we cannot but breathe and cannot but pray, so we cannot but worship. We are not freestanding persons—every human being worships something or someone! Worship is 'to give worth to' another person or thing. It is to invest value and substance in something or someone. We give 'worth' to our hobbies, our ambitions, our sport, our vocations, our girlfriend, our boyfriend, our wife, our husband, our children. In that sense we 'worship' these. We all know the expression: 'He worships his car' or 'She just adores him!' But our God is a jealous God and he commands that we worship him before all else. He is our Creator and he is also our Redeemer.

When God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses he prefaced them with the words: 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery'. He then said:

... you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or

worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God (Exod. 20:2–5).

In other words, the Ten Commandments were given on the basis that he had saved his people from slavery. They were to obey him as an appropriate response to their deliverance from Egypt. The same principle is true of us. God has wonderfully and lovingly redeemed us through Christ, and our worship of him ought to flow out of gratitude for his gracious salvation of us from the slavery of sin and death and impending judgment.

Sadly, our worship is not always with such single-minded devotion to the Lord. We can become like the Israelites who were soon seduced by the attractive idols of the pagan nations around them. They were deceived into thinking they could worship the Lord *and* these other gods. We too can come under that same delusion. As Christians we must take great care to ensure that our devotion is with one object in view—to serve God the Father as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

Our hearts have room only for one all-embracing devotion, and we can only cleave to one Lord. Every competitor to that devotion must be hated. As Jesus says, there is no alternative—either we love God or we hate him. We are confronted by an ‘either-or’: either we love God, or we love earthly goods. If we love God, we hate the world; and if we love the world, we hate God. It makes no difference whether that love be conscious and deliberate or not; in fact it is morally certain that it will be neither, and that our conscious and deliberate desire will be to serve two masters, to love God *and* the good things of life. We shall indignantly repudiate the suggestion that we hate God, and will be firmly convinced that we love him, whereas by trying to combine love for him with love for the world, we are turning our love for him

into hatred. And then we have lost the single eye, and our heart is no longer in fellowship with Jesus. Our deliberate intentions make no difference to the inevitable result: Ye cannot serve two masters, if ye be followers of Jesus Christ.¹

If we do not worship God as he is, then we will *have* to worship something or someone else. Because we are designed to worship we will fashion our own ‘gods’ as the objects of our devotion—we will manufacture our idols to which we will give worth. This is the message of Romans chapter 1:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles (Rom. 1:18–23).

Idolatry brings God’s wrath down upon us. His anger is against us when we hold down (or suppress) the truth of who he is and of how we ought to worship and obey him. Everyone knows that God IS—but ever since the Fall, mankind has chosen to suppress that inner knowledge. Instead, we go our own way independently of the God who is right here in our midst! No wonder Paul urges his Christian friends to flee from the worship of idols

¹ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 157.

(1 Cor. 10:14). But we can't but worship! If we will not worship the true God then we have to create our surrogate gods to whom we give reverence and devotion. Of this drive in Man, Geoffrey Bingham writes:

*He must worship, and so he makes his idols, trying to give them the characteristics or attributes of God so that they will be powerful enough to accomplish for him what he desires of them.*²

Our idolatry can extend to our church attendance and worship, as Eugene Peterson points out rather bluntly:

*The people in our congregations are, in fact, out shopping for idols. They enter our churches with the same mind-set in which they go to the shopping mall, to get something that will please them or satisfy an appetite or need. John Calvin saw the human heart as a relentlessly efficient factory for producing idols. Congregations commonly see the pastor as the quality-control engineer in the factory . . . The people who gather in our congregations want help through a difficult time; they want meaning and significance in their ventures. They want God, in a way, but certainly not a 'jealous God,' not the 'God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.' Mostly they want to be their own god and stay in control but have ancillary idol assistance for the hard parts, which the pastor can show them how to get.*³

Jesus taught the Samaritan woman at the well the truth about worship—that God the Father seeks those who will worship him in purity and in spirit and truth:

But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:23–24).

² Geoffrey Bingham, *The Way and Wonder of Worship*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1990, p. 98.

³ Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, pp. 80–1.

When we came to know Christ and were forgiven and justified from our sin and guilt, we were set free to worship God in sincerity and truth—in the Spirit. The Father is constantly seeking those who will worship him with this heart. The fact is, we no longer have to dread him. We no longer need fear to come into his presence. We are no longer debarred from his throne of grace. What's more, we are no longer in the dark about the Father's character. We are no longer ignorant about who he is and what he has done for us or how we ought to relate to him. We have been set free from the need to worship our idols! We are no longer heading in the wrong direction! We have been brought back into a right relationship with the Father and so can now worship him 'in spirit and truth'—in the manner he originally intended. Our liberation from guilt through the redemption of Christ has set us free to worship God without recourse to our self-made works. His death on our behalf cleanses our conscience from all self-justifying endeavours and has set us up to be able to worship God with clear minds and pure motives:

. . . how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God! (Heb. 9:14).

We are now headed for glory as those who have been brought back into God's family. We are those who are now inheritors of the Kingdom! It is with awe and reverence that we now give him worth by our disciplined worship:

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:28–29).

Clearly this means a lot more than just going to church on Sunday! If true worship of God means giving him the 'worth' that is due to his name, then every moment of every day ought to be worship. All that we do and say and think should be a giving of 'worth' to God. *Worship is therefore a 24-hour activity for the believer.* But how do we translate this into practice? Surely it must mean, at least, that God is now in our thoughts all the time. When we are busily engaged in our day-to-day activities, God is no longer absent. He is there in our minds as we consciously see what we are and what we are doing as being part of his purposes. When we defer to him in all that we do we have begun to learn the discipline of what it means to 'pray without ceasing' (1 Thess. 5:17). My will is now to do his will because his purposes take priority over my own (Rom. 7:18, 22). God's intentions and plans are now paramount so that I am always seeking his face in what I do and how I live. I no longer barge ahead without any reference to him. I don't make decisions in life without deferring to him and what he desires. In so doing, I am daily giving 'worth' to God as the sovereign Lord of my life. He now rules my life. This attitude of heart requires discipline, a constant diligence and a right focus:

Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ (Col. 3:23-24).

Our personal worship of God will grow and mature the more we understand what he has done in his love for us. That's why prayer and meditation on the Scriptures (discussed in the previous chapters) are so important. Our love for the Lord will grow as we see how much he loves us.

We will be drawn out more and more to give him our adoration and thanksgiving as we discover that his mercies come to us fresh every morning:

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness (Lam. 3:22-23).

Each day he is lavishing his good gifts on us, persevering with us, protecting us, watching over us, supplying our needs and fitting us for heaven! Worship will mean a giving of my body, my mind, my faculties and my capacities to the Lord for him to do with me as he pleases. Paul puts this very plainly in Romans when he says that when we present our bodies to the Lord then this is true worship!

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship (Rom. 12:1).

Clearly, Paul would not have made this plea if such worship was automatic for the believer! On the basis of all that God has done for us in Christ we are to consciously and deliberately surrender our bodies to the Lord. This ought to be a once-for-all act. As we will see in a later chapter, it means the yielding up to the Lord of all that I am as an independent person; it is a relinquishment of my body for it to be used in his service; it is an abdication of my own desires as to what my body does and where it goes and how it behaves; it is to renounce all that may seem to be my 'right' in regard to my body and, instead, to give myself over to the Lord unreservedly.

The Psalmists knew how wonderful it was to be in God's presence and to worship and pray to him in full

surrender to him! They longed to be able to give expression to their deepest desires to honour and praise the Lord:

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God? My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, 'Where is your God?' (Ps. 42:1-3).

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name. My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me (Ps. 63:1-8).

How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God. Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O LORD of hosts, my King and my God. Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise (Ps. 84:1-4).

Our daily, private worship of God is expressed publicly when we come together in corporate worship within our churches and fellowships. We are commanded to meet as God's people and not to despise the gift he has given of worshipping as his family in his presence. Our salvation is both personal and corporate. God saves us as persons, but he also saves us as a people. Many of the New Testament passages therefore speak in corporate terms when we are exhorted to grow and mature and be obedient *together*.

We live in a culture that is so individualistic that this same independent mind-set has invaded the church. But we must recognise that God has designed us to share *together* and grow *together*. The Bible does not make any allowance for individualistic Christianity. That means we ought to be disciplined in meeting regularly in worship and fellowship with other believers. One of the prime reasons is so that we might build one another up in the faith and be stirring up each other to good works! If we can't be bothered to meet with our fellow believers, how can this happen? How can we benefit from their faith and gifts of the Spirit, and how can they benefit from ours?

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, *not neglecting to meet together*, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching (Heb. 10:19-25).

In First Corinthians chapters 12, 13 and 14, Paul teaches about the exercise of the gifts of the Spirit. These God-given gifts are for the benefit of our fellow-believers. They are to be exercised with discipline and love, for the purpose of building up the church. It is when Christians meet for worship and fellowship that these gifts are expressed. But things can get out of hand—just as they had done in Corinth—and it requires discernment and self-control to know how and when to use the gifts which God has given to his people.

The same principle is true of our gifts of music and song relating to the worship of God. It is so easy for musicians to take over the worship and virtually ‘hijack’ the services! But the Bible is clear when it states that our songs and music flow out of the word and from being filled with the Spirit. They are as much for edifying one another as they are for praise to God:

Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, *singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts*, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 5:18–20).

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; *and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God*. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col. 3:16–17).

We need to be disciplined in not allowing our personal preferences in song and music to cloud the real reason for our singing and playing. We are worshipping the Lord, but we are also ministering to one another. That means the content and presentation of the music and song must be consistent with the word of God and so be building up those who are participating. Many so-called Christian songs today have virtually no substance in their words—they have catchy tunes but are saying nothing!

Since our public worship is intended to reflect the character of God and so convey to all present the reality of his presence, then we ought to pay far more attention to our attitude of heart when we come to church. Not only should the service itself be conducive to drawing people to the

Lord, but so too ought the time immediately before and after the service. Sometimes our services are just bedlam! Paul instructs that all should be ‘done decently and in order’ (1 Cor. 14:40).

When you join others for worship, do not go flippantly or lightheartedly. Go with reverence. It is Almighty God whom you intend to meet. Go also with expectancy. Expect to meet with God, and be satisfied with nothing less. Enter into the worship with enthusiasm as well as reverence. Let the hymns be an expression of your own feelings. Sing not merely to enjoy yourself, but as part of your worship of God.⁴

In regard to worship and singing John Wesley offered this advice:

Above all, sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing Him more than yourself or any other creature. In order to do this, attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually.⁵

When we come to worship, it ought to be with the attitude of heart that we have something to contribute, rather than just a desire to ‘get something out of it’. The following story illustrates this principle:

In a certain village there was a well in the middle of the green from which water was drawn by means of an old hand-pump which bore all the marks of antiquity. One day a new resident to that locality brought his empty bucket to the well and began to pump. However, not knowing the pump and its habits, he found himself unable to draw any water. After many fruitless attempts at working the handle up and down he departed angrily, his bucket

⁴ Jeffery, *Walk Worthy*, p. 27.

⁵ Quoted by Jeffery in *Walk Worthy*, p. 27.

still empty. Shortly afterwards an old woman came to the pump with an empty bucket in one hand and a small jug in the other, filled with water. This she poured down the pump and then began to work the handle up and down. A little gurgling was followed immediately by a great gush of water and her bucket and jug were quickly filled to the brim.

The man who came with nothing to give went away empty, but the woman who came with something for priming the pump went away full. Thus it is in Christian experience. Those who come to God with something to give Him of worship and praise and thanksgiving go away filled; those with nothing go away empty. When we are tempted to complain that we get nothing out of church attendance or prayer we should ask ourselves whether we go merely to get something from God, and whether we go to prayer only for what we will gain by it. Or do we go to Him in order to break an 'alabaster box of precious ointment' and to pour it on His feet—to give Him something?⁶

We need to be reminded that it is in the fellowship of other believers that we grow to maturity. It is as we are disciplined in ministering to one another that we grow. It is as we share those gifts distributed by the Spirit, that we build each other up in the faith. It is as we encourage one another in the certainties of the truth that we are enabled to press on without fainting or falling by the way. And it is as we corporately worship and come into the presence of the Father that we are strengthened in our faith-perspective of the present and of eternity. It is then that we are able to see ahead to that day when we shall all be before the Throne as true persons, sharing the glory of the Father.

We have been made for worship, and until we learn to be disciplined in our daily adoration of the Lord *as he really is*, then we will never be at peace. We will always be

restless. We will be always wanting to find some other thing to be the focal point of our inner drives. We will constantly be wanting to give veneration to someone or something else outside of ourselves:

It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night, to the music of the lute and the harp, to the melody of the lyre. For you, O LORD, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy (Ps. 92:1–4).

I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. Every day I will bless you, and praise your name forever and ever. Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable (Ps. 145:1–3).

I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations. I declare that your steadfast love is established forever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens (Ps. 89:1–2).

Worship the LORD in holy splendor; tremble before him, all the earth (Ps. 96:9).

Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing (Ps. 100:2).

The full picture of our ultimate worship is given in the Book of Revelation:

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!' And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and

⁶ Anderson, *The Quiet Time*, pp. 39–40.

they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.'

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?' I said to him, 'Sir, you are the one that knows.' Then he said to me, 'These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes' (Rev. 7:9-17).

In the end, all will be worship!

16

The Renewed Mind

We come now to consider how the principles of self-discipline ought to be worked out in our lives as believers in the realm of the mind. We don't seem to realise that the mind is the battleground on which every moral and spiritual conflict is fought. It is imperative therefore that we make every effort to ensure that our minds are constantly being transformed so as to be in accordance with the mind of Christ.

Our minds belong to God. We are responsible to him as to how we use our minds and how we think. We are to love and serve the Lord, not only with our whole heart, but also with our whole *mind*. On one occasion Jesus reminded his hearers of the first commandment, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your *mind*' (Matt. 22:37).

Thus, more than anything else, we human beings ought to be using the incredible faculty of our minds for the glory and honour of God. But, as fallen creatures, we have minds that are distorted and perverted. That image of God which was once in us has been marred and defaced—and nowhere more than in the mind and in the realm of our thoughts.

Running the Race

The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually (Gen. 6:5).

As Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these people, of corrupt mind and counterfeit faith, also oppose the truth (2 Tim. 3:8).

Ever since the Fall a blindness has come over us because of our defection from God. Because we rejected his Spirit to empower, guide, lead and give us wisdom, our minds have been clouded and sullied as a result:

. . . for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened . . . And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done (Rom. 1:21, 28).

‘Who can search out our crimes? We have thought out a cunningly conceived plot.’ For the human heart and mind are deep (Ps. 64:6).

For fools speak folly, and their minds plot iniquity: to practice ungodliness, to utter error concerning the LORD, to leave the craving of the hungry unsatisfied, and to deprive the thirsty of drink (Isa. 32:6).

Even God’s own people, Israel, were blind to the truth until such time as he himself illuminated their understanding. When Moses summoned the people to rehearse all that the Lord had done for them, he declared that they still had not been ‘given a mind to understand’:

You have seen all that the LORD did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs, and those great

The Renewed Mind

wonders. But to this day the LORD has not given you a mind to understand, or eyes to see, or ears to hear (Deut. 29:2–4).

Paul said much the same thing in his day, showing that the cause was a blindness from the enemy—Satan. He is the god of this world and blinds men and women to the light of the truth of God, maintaining a cloud of spiritual darkness over their minds. Not until such time as God shines the light of his truth into our minds are we able to see and know things aright:

In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God . . . For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:4, 6).

King Solomon knew that he could not be the person God had called him to be unless the Lord himself endowed him with wisdom. His famous prayer for God’s grace and help in being able to wisely govern his people is a wonderful illustration of our need for dependence upon God for a mind that is oriented to him. God answered by giving Solomon a ‘wise and discerning mind’:

Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people? . . . I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you (1 Kings 3:9, 12).

When Jesus commenced his ministry in Palestine he came preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom, calling on people to repent and believe (Mark 1:14–15). The important word he

used was ‘repent’. This means to ‘change one’s mind’. Whereas in the past our minds have been set in opposition to God, they are now to be turned towards him and for him. Whereas in the past our minds have not wanted to have anything to do with God, now we are to be concerned for his truth and his glory. We are called upon to change our minds about our sin. We are to change our minds about holiness. We are to change our minds about heaven and hell. We are to change our minds about what God is doing in history and so side with him. The call to repentance is not a suggestion, it is a command! ‘While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent’ (Acts 17:30). *We are commanded to change our minds!*

This ability to change our minds—to repent—is a God-given gift. He commands us to repent, but he gives us the power to do so—because if he didn’t, we wouldn’t! After witnessing first-hand the conversion of the Gentile centurion Cornelius, Peter reported to his friends in Jerusalem, ‘God has *given* even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life’ (Acts 11:18).

Thus Christians are those who have been wrought upon by God in order to bring them back into a right relationship with himself. At the heart of that new relationship is a changed mind. Our minds have now come under a new influence—that of the indwelling Holy Spirit. He brings into our minds—through the revelation of Scripture—totally new thought patterns. He enables us to see things

as they really are—not as we had previously perceived them to be. Before Christ came to us and renewed us by his Spirit, the way we saw things was clouded by our sinful and rebellious perspectives. It was impossible for us to think aright. Our minds were in darkness.

We could not see or understand spiritual and moral truths correctly.

The disciples on the road to Emmaus after Jesus’ crucifixion were downcast and disillusioned. Then Jesus came and walked with them, sharing with them the truth concerning himself: ‘Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures’ (Luke 24:45). Like them, we have had our minds opened to understand the Scriptures, and we are now to be disciplined in conforming our minds to these new principles. Our minds are involved in an ongoing process of being renewed by the Spirit according to his word. But it will take daily resolve on our part to ensure that our thinking is in line with the truth and not still conforming to the old patterns of the world in which we once indulged. The New Testament writers constantly exhort us to be what we now are—new men and women with new minds!

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom. 12:2).

... be renewed in the spirit of your minds (Eph. 4:23).

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus (Phil. 2:5).

In Romans chapter 8, Paul teaches about the huge difference between having the mind-set of the flesh or the mind-set of the Spirit. When we came to know Christ, we received the wonderful gift of the Holy Spirit. He now indwells us to lead us into the truth concerning Christ and he is always drawing us out to be like him. He is prompting and leading us into holiness. We are ‘in the Spirit’ and now have his mind-set. We are no longer ‘in the flesh’, with that old Adamic self-oriented mind-set. Whereas we

once lived according to the flesh and so our mind was oriented to the flesh—doing only what we wanted in our sinfulness—we now live according to the Spirit and our mind is oriented to the things of the Spirit—to doing that which God wants in holiness and according to the truth:

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot (Rom. 8:5–7).

It is through the inner work of the Spirit that we are now able to know the mind of the Lord. Before we were converted we didn't have a clue! But what we could never have conceived before, we now know through the Spirit:

... these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual ... 'For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' But we have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:10–13, 16).

We need now to think about how we apply these great principles in daily living. Firstly, we must recognise that what we are in our minds is what we are in life. In other words, an ill-disciplined mind will lead to ill-disciplined ways of living:

The integrity of the upright guides them, but the crookedness of the treacherous destroys them (Prov. 11:3).

To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure. Their very minds and consciences are corrupted (Titus 1:15).

Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth (Col. 3:2).

Where there is an untidy life, loose or flippant talk, lack of proper Christian dignity and upright bearing—all these may indicate an undisciplined mind. Elisabeth Elliott says: 'A simple and orderly life represents a clean and orderly mind. Muddled thinking inevitably results in muddled living'.¹ Thus the chaotic room or house may tell a lot about what we are in our minds. It may mean we have never really learned to order our affairs. A young Christian once told me that he had never made his bed in his whole life! I asked, 'Why not?' He replied that he could see no reason to do so when he was only going to muck it up the next night! I asked my friend what state the world would be in if God decided there was no point in keeping everything shipshape today, because tomorrow he would only have to do the same thing all over again! Thankfully, our gracious God sustains our universe every moment of every day by the word of his power (Heb. 1:3). He upholds all things and keeps everything in place just as it ought to be (Col. 1:17). Were he not to do so, our world would immediately plunge into chaos. From the 'mind' of God flows order, beauty, harmony, structure, unity. Since we are in his image, we go against the way things really are when we do not discipline our minds according to his word. When we are not being disciplined we are failing to reflect aright his character by what we do and say each day.

¹ Elliot, *Discipline: The Glad Surrender*, p. 57.

Secondly, we need to see from the Scriptures that (on the moral level) what we are in our minds determines how God views us. For example: in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:21–30 Jesus spoke of those who murder by calling another a fool out of hate; and of those who commit adultery by looking lustfully on a woman. In other words, *God takes the thought for the deed*. It is therefore possible to live in a private world in the realm of the mind that no one else knows anything about. Thus we can indulge in fantasies and unworthy ‘wish-dreams’ without anyone else ever being aware of the fact. But God takes those wrong thoughts as the deed! The private kingdom of the mind seems safe enough, but he knows what is going on in the deepest recesses of our minds:

You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away (Ps. 139:2).

... on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all (Rom. 2:16).

We can indulge in these private mind-games and think it doesn't matter. But all ungodly and unworthy thoughts and images which we allow to pass through our minds can deeply affect our lives and cause us to develop bad habits that are almost impossible to throw off. Our mind belongs to the Lord and we need to surrender our thoughts to Christ's sovereign superintendence:

We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ (2 Cor. 10:4–5).

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything

worthy of praise, *think about these things*. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you (Phil. 4:8–9).

But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by its cunning, your *thoughts* will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ (2 Cor. 11:3).

Self-discipline in bringing every thought into conformity with the word of God may prove to be one of the most difficult tasks we will ever undertake. Yet we must persevere in this and seek, by his grace, to make his thoughts our thoughts, his mind our mind. Sadly, we live in an age in which many people don't bother to think much at all—including many Christians. We have become a lazy culture of fast food, instant entertainment, immediate gratification and mass boredom. We have forgotten how to enjoy the wonderful gift of using our minds to engage one another in meaningful conversations and worthwhile shared activities. Years ago I used to regularly visit some Christian friends, but it was almost impossible to carry on a decent conversation because of their preoccupation with the TV—it was *always* on! Of course, I have to be careful here, because that might be how others see me!

The point is, we are rapidly losing the art of thinking, of conversing, of discussing—of engaging our minds to work through on our own, and with others, the great issues of life. Nowadays, we just can't be bothered. I think that's probably why so few Christians seem to read much these days.

Thirdly, within the Christian fellowship we need to be of one mind in our relationships and in our understanding of God's truth. There is no place for individual posturing. The unity of the Spirit must be evidenced in our midst as

Running the Race

we grow together in love and acceptance of one another. That requires a disciplining of the mind—both individually and corporately:

. . . make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord *and of one mind* (Phil. 2:2).

Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and *a humble mind* (1 Pet. 3:8).

. . . making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3).

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony (Col. 3:14).

Fourthly, our witness to the truth in a pagan world is also a product of a single-minded desire to reflect Christ in all we do. If we are slack and undisciplined in our thinking, or immature in our thoughts, or unconcerned about eternal issues, then that will be reflected in what we are to those who are ignorant of the truth. This may even include those who are in the church!

Come to a sober and right mind, and sin no more; for some people have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame (1 Cor. 15:34).

Consider the implications of the following Scriptures:

I will call to mind the deeds of the LORD; I will remember your wonders of old (Ps. 77:11).

A tranquil mind gives life to the flesh, but passion makes the bones rot (Prov. 14:30).

The human mind may devise many plans, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will be established (Prov. 19:21).

The Renewed Mind

Apply your mind to instruction and your ear to words of knowledge (Prov. 23:12).

Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace—in peace because they trust in you (Isa. 26:3).

I the LORD test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings (Jer. 17:10).

. . . but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members . . . So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin (Rom. 7:23, 25).

I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean (Rom. 14:14).

Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds (Eph. 4:17).

To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure. Their very minds and consciences are corrupted (Titus 1:15).

All these Scriptures are telling us that we ought to be thinking with the mind of Christ and not with a secular mind. In all we do, we are to defer to the Lord and his word rather than trying to work things out ourselves. Within the life of our church, as well as in our normal everyday affairs of life, we ought to be sober, sound-minded, disciplined in our thinking—simply because this is an integral part of our discipleship where eternal issues are at stake. We ought to heed Peter's exhortation:

Therefore *prepare your minds for action*; **discipline yourselves**; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed (1 Pet. 1:13).

A disciplined mind in the life of the Christian does not just happen!

As we willingly consent to the crucifixion of the earthly mind and purposefully yield to the sanctifying influences of the Holy Spirit, He will perform the miracle. Our minds will be transformed in ever-increasing degree by the renewing of the Holy Spirit.²

The hymn writer put it well:

May the mind of Christ my Saviour
Live in me from day to day,
By His love and power controlling
All I do and say.³

² Sanders, *Problems of Christian Discipleship*, p. 44.

³ Kate Barclay Wilkinson.

17

The Disciplined Body

As Christians we should be noted for our responsible actions in the everyday affairs of life. As Charles Colson puts it: 'The world isn't looking at our tracts and rallies and telecasts and study manuals. It is looking at us and how we behave'.¹

The commonplace things should be important to the Christian. We have been given a new perspective on life—we now view everything in the light of eternity. We have a new attitude to living—we see it in the context of what God is doing in history. We now have a new set of standards—we see how God has ordered all things and we understand how he intends men and women to live. We now have a new sense of responsibility—we see how God has rescued us and given us a new life, and we want to respond to him in gratitude. We now have a new desire for integrity—we want to reflect him and to represent him to others. We now have new goals—we want all that we do to be for him and his glory.

What all this means is that every area of our lives are now to come under the discipline of the Holy Spirit so that

¹ Charles Colson, *The Body: Being Light in Darkness*, Word, Milton Keynes, 1992, p. 103.

what we *are* as persons—whole persons—will bring glory to our Father:

... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven (Matt. 5:16).

If (as we saw in the last chapter) our minds belong to God, then so too do our whole bodies:

... do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body (1 Cor. 6:19–20).

Paul places things in a right perspective in Romans chapter 12 when he exhorts believers to surrender their bodies as a living sacrifice based on all that God has done for them in Christ. The apostle has spent eleven chapters telling his readers of the mercy and grace of God, and so he implores them to give themselves over entirely to the Lord:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship (Rom. 12:1).

We worship God (or give him the worth that is due to him) by offering up our bodies to his service. We sacrifice our bodies when we yield them entirely to God for him to do with them as he pleases. In so doing we discover his good, acceptable and perfect will for us, as verse 2 goes on to say:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom. 12:2).

It is a fallacy to think we can serve God at some sort of spiritual level without giving him our bodies. That means we may have to ‘wrestle’ with ourselves in order to come

to terms with the fact that our bodies are deeply related to worship and holy sacrifice. We must take seriously the relationship between the physical and the spiritual, and see that our habits sometimes have a stranglehold over us that deeply compromises our ability to live in the way that God would want. The hold must be broken so that we can be free to serve the Lord aright. We must face the fact that we can’t give our hearts to the Lord and keep our bodies for ourselves!

We happen to be in bodies that walk, talk, think, move, go places and do things. It is what we *do* with our bodies that communicates what we *are*. We don’t realise how closely spiritual things are related to the physical and therefore we need to pay far greater attention to what our bodies are and do if we are to be serious about going on in spiritual growth.

Some people think the body is evil. This is not true. Our bodies are not sinful in themselves. There is nothing wrong or sinful or evil about our bodies. God created them. The trouble is, sin *uses* the body as an instrument by which it acts. It is via our bodies that sin has power over us. It is through our members that sin operates. Our bodies are the arena in which sin displays its power. It is by means of our desires, our appetites, our senses, that sin expresses itself and by which we experience the effects of sin in our lives. Hence it is our eyes, our tongues, our hands, our feet, our emotions, our minds, our drives, our urges, our natural instincts, that are the avenue for sin. It is only in this sense that our bodies are ‘sinful’.

We are taught in Romans chapter 6 that sin no longer has any legal right to use the body of a Christian since he/she has died to sin in the death of Christ. Christ has taken the guilt and penalty of sin and it has no basis for

using the body as an instrument of sin. Of course, it will never cease trying to do so. But we are to reckon on the death of Christ as being for us and therefore we do not have to yield our bodies to sinful desires and actions:

Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace (Rom. 6:12–14).

This calls for self-control! We are to be disciplined in resisting the pressures of indwelling sin as it seeks to manifest itself through the natural drives and desires of the body. For example: hunger is a natural desire of the body, but we must be disciplined so that it does not become gluttony. There are Christians who, through ill-disciplined eating habits, are grossly overweight. They may be ready to judge others who are not disciplined in relation to moral or ethical matters, but are blind to their own complete lack of self-discipline when it comes to overeating. Other folk may be equally ill-disciplined in their eating habits but their trim physical appearance gives no evidence of it.²

We are sexual beings and God has gifted us with the powerful drive and mandate to procreate. Elisabeth Elliot comments:

Like every other good gift that comes down from the Father of Lights, the gift of sexual activity is meant to be used as He

² Christians are not immune to chronic physical disorders which cause weight problems. Others may have inherited a metabolism from their parents which means they battle every day to keep their weight in check—not through the want of trying, but because of their genes.

intended, within the clearly defined limits of His purpose, which is marriage. If marriage is not included in God's will for an individual, then sexual activity is not included either . . . Today this advice will be laughed out of court by most. Sexual control is regarded as a hang-up from which the truly mature have been liberated. There are those still, however—as there have been in every age—who hold as holy the intimate relationship between a man and a woman, recognizing in it a type of Christ's love for His own bride, His church. As such it is not to be profaned.

This attitude can be held only by the mind's being captive to Christ. It is a miracle of grace. Let us not imagine it is anything less.³

In our permissive culture, whether a believer be married or unmarried, it is going to take discipline for the Christian to remain obedient to God's order with respect to our bodies' natural sexual drives. (We will see more on this subject in chapter 22.)

Because the sexual drive is a natural God-given desire of the body, we have to exercise self-control so that it is reserved for marriage and does not become lust or adultery or fornication or homosexuality. It is very easy to rationalise our urges and make excuses as a cover for our failure to take the Scriptures seriously in the matter of sexual purity.

Tiredness is part of the body's natural rhythm resulting from work and the expenditure of mental, physical and emotional energy. The body requires rest and recuperation. We all know that we *need* regular sleep but we can fall into one of two traps: that of 'burning the candle at both ends' or of becoming lazy and habitually sleeping in! I find it really takes discipline to go to bed when I ought, just as much as it takes discipline to get up when I should!

³ Elliot, *Discipline*, pp. 54–5.

So then, we are to be disciplined in bringing all the natural functions of our bodies under the Lordship of Christ so that the life which we display to the world will be like his and to his glory.

This also means maintaining our bodies in good health as best as we are able, consistent with our general God-given constitution and temperament. Regular exercise is of value, though it is not something that should become an obsession. I have tried to get into the habit of walking as much as possible instead of using the car. If I feel I can climb the stairs I do so instead of taking the lift. My biggest problem is that of sitting at the desk too long. I need to get up at regular intervals and move around or do some simple exercises.

Physical training or some form of regular keep-fit routine may be necessary, but it should be kept in proportion with the far greater need to be holy:

... while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come (1 Tim. 4:8).

Eating the right food is part of our responsibility to be keeping our bodies in good condition so that we might be able to serve the Lord fully and consistently. A good example of this principle is seen in the life of Daniel. Carted off to Babylon he could have abandoned his Jewish 'religious scruples' and eaten the rich food in the royal court of his captors. Instead, Daniel and his friends chose to maintain their eating habits so as not to dishonour the Lord. God richly blessed their faithfulness and Daniel was greatly used as the Lord's witness to the pagan nation in which he lived.

Writing as a North American, Elisabeth Elliot encourages Christians to watch what they eat:

I do not refer here only to overeating, which is a bad thing, but to eating the wrong things. Too many sweets, too many rich things, too much junk. Take a walk through any supermarket and note the space given to soft drinks, candy, packaged snack foods, dry cereals. We could do very well without any of these. Try it for a week. You may be surprised at how dependent you are on them. You may even discover that you are an addict.⁴

Unfortunately, we Australians also live in a culture that tends to overeat and which indulges far too much in junk food. Christians are not immune from these social ills. We ought to be careful lest we develop bad eating habits since these can seriously diminish our effectiveness in being ready to serve the Lord. As one writer has put it: 'When a man is unhealthy physically it will be easier for him to be unhealthy spiritually'.⁵ Moreover, Christians who do not eat proper meals and who are slack in the way they look after their bodies are a poor witness to the unconverted around them.

The Bible has a lot to say about fasting as an aid to focusing on the will of the Lord in any given situation. But in our modern Christian culture fasting is something that is virtually unheard-of! We might consider the huge benefit to our soul's welfare if we were to fast during those occasions when we especially and urgently need the Lord's wisdom and guidance. Consider the following examples. Nehemiah, deeply distressed on hearing what had happened in his beloved Jerusalem, sought the Lord with prayer and fasting:

⁴ Elliot, *Discipline*, p. 47.

⁵ H. W. Cragg, *The Conqueror's Way*, p. 67.

Running the Race

When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven (Neh. 1:4).

Daniel was appalled to discover from Jeremiah's prophecy how far God's people had strayed from the truth. He turned to the Lord in anxious prayer and fasting:

Then I turned to the Lord God, to seek an answer by prayer and supplication with fasting and sackcloth and ashes (Dan. 9:3).

God himself urged his erring people to seek him with a new heart and mind:

Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning (Joel 2:12).

The early church sought to know the mind of the Lord in regard to sending out missionaries for the work of the Gospel. It was while they were worshipping and fasting that the Holy Spirit spoke to them:

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off (Acts 13:2-3).

During their first missionary tour, Paul and Barnabas established numerous churches in Asia Minor. But it was with prayer and fasting that they committed their care to the chosen elders from each of the fledgling congregations:

And after they had appointed elders for them in each church, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe (Acts 14:23).

An important part of the discipline of the body relates to the tongue, and the Bible has a good deal to say about the difficulty of keeping it in check!

The Disciplined Body

Better the poor walking in integrity than one perverse of speech who is a fool (Prov. 19:1).

To watch over mouth and tongue is to keep out of trouble (Prov. 21:23).

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless (James 1:26).

For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so (James 3:2-10).

Richard Taylor says:

One may have a disciplined body, a disciplined mind, a disciplined will, even disciplined emotions, appetites, and habits, but a loose tongue betrays a fatal fault in the armor. The character is defective.⁶

Thus our speech, our language and what we say, is a direct indicator of what we are. We often know a person by their words. Evil language, foul jokes, or even suggestive

⁶ Taylor, *The Disciplined Life*, p. 34.

conversation have no part in the life of the Christian. Just ask yourself: Is my speech edifying? Does it build others up? Is what I say true? Is it correct? Is my language slack or sloppy? Is there anything in my speech that is evil? Am I dishonouring God in any way by what I say or by the *way* I say things? Our words are the product of our thoughts, thus we ought to be disciplined in our thought-life if we are not to give expression in our words to that which is dishonouring to the Lord. A good way to combat evil thoughts is to absolutely refuse to allow them to be expressed in words!

In the following injunctions Paul urges us to be disciplined in our speech:

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another (Eph. 4:25).

Entirely out of place is obscene, silly, and vulgar talk; but instead, let there be thanksgiving (Eph. 5:4).

Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone (Col. 4:6).

Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity (1 Tim. 4:12).

Show yourself in all respects a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, gravity, and sound speech that cannot be censured; then any opponent will be put to shame, having nothing evil to say of us (Titus 2:7–8).

Keeping our bodies in line is a work of the Spirit. Of ourselves, we will always find it an uphill battle to restrain ourselves from wrong actions and attitudes relating to the way we use our bodies. Thus Paul exhorts us to trust the Holy Spirit to put to death the (wrong) deeds of the body:

... for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live (Rom. 8:13).

Our life in the body is now a life lived in the Spirit—having died to the law but come alive to God. We have been co-crucified with Christ, but the life we now live *in the body* is his life in us. Another way to say this is that Christ dwells in us by faith. Or we could say that by faith we live in the reality of that union wherein he lives his life in us and through us. Because we have died when Christ died, we are no longer under any obligation to live law-way. Instead, we are now to live faith-way. But that life of faith is still the life of another—Christ. Our bodily life is now lived in the context of us being new creations. This means that what our bodies now are and do ought to be in line with who Christ is *in us* by the indwelling Spirit.

For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:19–20).

The New Testament is full of instructions as to how we are to view our bodies in relation to these spiritual realities and the new role our bodies have in the divine life that we have now come into by faith. Consider the following:

‘Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food,’ and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body (1 Cor. 6:13).

Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and of spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7:1).

Running the Race

It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death (Phil. 1:20).

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor (1 Thess. 4:3–4).

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 5:23).

Paul knew only too well that it was a daily battle to discipline his body so that he did not dishonour Christ by living or behaving in a way that contradicted the Gospel. He spoke of the effort he made to keep his body in line!

So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified (1 Cor. 9:26–27).

There are a multitude of other personal matters relating to the body that are not unimportant to our spiritual life and our witness to the world. We could ask ourselves the following questions: How often do I shower or bathe? Do I keep my body clean? Do I think body odour a matter of indifference? Should I be regularly using a deodorant? Is my hair well-groomed? Do I look scruffy? What do I convey to others about how I look and dress? Do I keep my clothes clean and tidy? What witness to the world do I convey by the way I dress and present myself? Am I overweight? Have I had enough sleep? Do I need a holiday? Am I eating the right foods? Is my body commending the Gospel and honouring Christ? Do I care one way or the

The Disciplined Body

other about these questions? (We will discuss some of these in chapter 21.)

Having asked these questions, I would be the first to admit that it is not easy to discern just what things are bad habits and what are cultural trends in our society. For example, Christian teenagers may dress in a way that appears to me to be sloppy and undisciplined, but to them it is just how everyone is dressing. Where is the dividing line? How are the principles of self-discipline to be applied in the light of the culture in which we live?

Although we need to be concerned about all these practical issues, they are not to become an obsession. We are not to be focussing so much on the externals that we lose sight of the higher need for our internal spiritual life to be in ‘good health’. Because we are sinners, our bodies do not serve us well—they get old and wear out. They become diseased and frail. But thankfully we can look forward to the day when we will be given a new body in the resurrection—a body like Christ’s:

But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself (Phil. 3:20–21).

Meantime, we ought to be concerned about everything we do here and now in the body, for it is on that basis that our works will be judged:

For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil (2 Cor. 5:10).

In other words, although we are justified by faith and have been fully accepted by God through Christ, we must learn

to live in a way that is consistent with our new standing. Our ‘works’ will be judged in the end, just like everyone else’s. In our case, our works will have nothing to do with our acceptance or salvation, but everything to do with our ‘reward’ in heaven. How we have lived as a believer; what our conduct has been like; the manner in which we have represented Christ to the world around us—all these issues are of vital importance right now. We ought to think about what the Scriptures are saying concerning our need to be disciplined here and now, in the light of where we are headed and what will happen when Christ comes again:

But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. *Your reward will be great*, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked (Luke 6:35).

If what has been built on the foundation survives, *the builder will receive a reward* (1 Cor. 3:14).

Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord *you will receive the inheritance as your reward*; you serve the Lord Christ (Col. 3:23–24).

Be on your guard, so that you do not lose what we have worked for, but may receive *a full reward* (2 John 8).

See, I am coming soon; *my reward is with me*, to repay according to everyone’s work (Rev. 22:12).

Many Christians consider it wrong to think in terms of a ‘reward’ in heaven. But that could betray an inadequate understanding of what the Bible means when it talks about such rewards. I think C. S. Lewis captures the truth in this wonderful statement:

There are different kinds of rewards. There is the reward which has no natural connection with the things you do to earn it and is

quite foreign to the desires that ought to accompany those things. Money is not the natural reward of love; that is why we call a man mercenary if he marries a woman for the sake of her money. But marriage is the proper reward for a real lover, and he is not mercenary for desiring it . . . The proper rewards are not simply tacked on to the activity for which they are given, but are the activity itself in consummation.⁷

Our ‘reward’ in heaven will be the consummation of all that we have put into our lives here and now by way of likeness to Christ. Perhaps it could be compared with the ‘reward’ I get when I pass that exam with flying colours and for which I have studied so hard. I put so much into it and the good outcome brought enormous personal satisfaction. Some of my fellow students put very little into their studies and there was nothing to show for it in the end.

The silly tale is told of a wealthy Christian lady who owned a huge mansion in a prosperous suburb of a large city. When she died she expected to receive a substantial ‘home’ in heaven commensurate with her status on earth. But when she was assigned a rather small and unassuming cottage, she complained—having expected something far grander. She was told that this was all that could be done, based on the ‘material’ she had sent on ahead from her life on earth. I think we can get the point!

Peter urges us to press on to live godly lives and to make our calling and election sure. Why? So that, at the end, we will have a rich entrance into heaven provided for us (2 Pet. 1:10–11). *That ‘abundant’ entry will be our reward!*

⁷ Quoted by Charles Swindol, *Simple Faith*, Word Publishing, Nashville, 1991, p. 125.

Ordering Our Time

God has wonderfully punctuated the creation with markers of time:

God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day (Gen. 1:5).

We are blessed to be living within the framework of time—night, day, summer, winter, a past, a present and a future. This gift of time places on us a responsibility that must be taken seriously. We must be sure that the way in which we use the time allotted to us accords with God’s purposes and is not just tailored to suit our own agendas in life:

Each day comes upon us with unexpected suddenness, often accompanied by the sound of an unwelcome alarm clock! It runs its course with great rapidity—a day which can never return, a day which has reaped the harvest of yesterday, and sown the seed of tomorrow. If it is to be redeemed for God it must be planned with diligence and carried through with discipline.¹

The writer of Ecclesiastes wrote about the fact that there is a right time for everything in life:

¹ H. W. Cragg, *The Conqueror’s Way*, pp. 64–5.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace. What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end (Eccl. 3:1–11).

We must never forget that *time belongs to God*. Thus to each of us has been given a block of time for which we are to be stewards—responsible for every minute that he gives us. Oswald Sanders writes:

... time is opportunity . . . We exchange it for certain occupations and activities, important or otherwise, and herein lies the importance of a planned life . . . Time is a God given stewardship for which we must render account and our use of it will determine the value of our contribution to our day and generation.²

We often hear the expressions: ‘I’m too busy’ or ‘I don’t have the time’. But is that really true? For the Christian, there are enough hours in each day for us to be doing all that God has purposed for us. In other words, there is always enough time to do the will of God! If we say we have ‘no time’ or are ‘too busy’, then that might betray the fact that we are not living within his will or in accord with

² Sanders, *Problems of Christian Discipleship*, p. 119.

what he has planned for us. It may mean that we just don't want to do what is being asked of us, and have filled our lives with lots of other things instead:

Time is wealth. God has given to all of us each day the same amount, and we are responsible to Him for the way in which we spend it . . . We cannot give ourselves wholly to God unless we surrender to Him our time.³

Jesus found sufficient hours in each day to do all that the Father had purposed for him, and he reminded his disciples, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight?' (John 11:9). The time allotted to us cannot be lengthened, it cannot be shortened. We cannot stretch time. We cannot hoard time. It must be spent! Time cannot be postponed—it can't be put on hold. There is no 'freeze' button for time. Nor are there any fast-forward or rewind buttons:

The solemn thing about time is, of course, that it can be lost and time lost can never be regained. It cannot be hoarded; it must be spent. It cannot be postponed; it is irretrievably lost. How supremely important, then, that we make full use of the time allotted to us for the fulfilment of our life purpose . . . The truth is that if we do not have sufficient time to discharge our responsibilities, we either have undertaken responsibilities not laid upon us by the Lord, or we are not making strategic use of the time He has given us . . . Each of us has as much time as anyone else in the world. Others may have more money, ability, influence, but we each have twenty-four hours in a day . . . We are not responsible for our capacity, but we are responsible for the strategic investment of our time.⁴

³ Godfrey Robinson & Stephen Winward, *The King's Business*, CSSM, London, 1957, p. 25.

⁴ Sanders, *Problems of Christian Discipleship*, pp. 119–21.

The stewardship of time involves us in planning carefully our use of each day. We need to buy up every opportunity, as Paul puts it in Ephesians and Colossians:

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil (Eph. 5:15–16).

Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time (Col. 4:5).

These verses clearly imply that there is the ever-present possibility that we can fritter away our time and not use it wisely because we don't value it. Thus we ought to be disciplined in 'buying up' time or 'making the most' of our time and the opportunities we have been given in which to live for God's glory. In writing about the preciousness of time, Jonathan Edwards said:

. . . upon time we should set a high value, and be exceedingly careful that it be not lost; and we are therefore exhorted [in Eph. 5:16] to exercise wisdom and circumspection, in order that we may redeem it. And hence it appears, that *time is exceedingly precious*.⁵

Edwards goes on to give the various reasons why time ought to be so precious to the Christian:

- Because our eternal happiness depends on the right use of our time here and now.
- Time is very short and when we recognise that a commodity is scarce we place a greater value on it.

⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1988, p. 233.

- Time is precious because we have no certainty of its continuance. We know it is short but we do not know just how short!
- Time is precious because when it is past it cannot be recovered.

It is therefore the wise person who heeds the Psalmist's instruction, 'So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart' (Ps. 90:12). How then can we gain a wise heart by counting our days? How can we best use the hours God gives us each day? The Psalmist declared, 'My times are in your hand' (Ps. 31:15). Thus the planning and right use of our hours should be under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit. Only the Lord can show us how to use the hours he gives us each day. That's why it's important to begin each day with prayer, asking that he might guide and lead us in the right use of the hours ahead. Wasted time is lost time. It can never be recovered. So, having prayed about it, we need to think ahead and work out the best and most productive way of using our time, and then be disciplined in adhering to our plan. This should involve all our activities and responsibilities such that there is a healthy balance in all we do. Oswald Sanders puts the following proposition:

Each week has one hundred and sixty-eight hours. Let us allow a generous fifty-six hours for sleep and rest; twenty-one hours for meals and family devotions; fifty-six hours for work and study. There still remain thirty-five hours, or five hours a day, What happens to them? How are they invested? These are the critical hours of life which determine whether our lives will be commonplace or extraordinary. These are the hours which we so frequently allow to slip from us. Our spare time—and it is not true

to say we have no spare time—is at once our danger and our opportunity.⁶

Right planning of our time should enable us to live unhurried lives. God does not intend us to be rushing about, madly trying to do a hundred things at once. That is a poor use of time, and poor stewardship. When we read of Jesus' ministry in the Gospels, he never seemed to be in a hurry. He had time for individuals—like the woman at the well. He had time for his disciples and their many questions. He had time for preaching and teaching and healing. He had time to draw aside for prayer and to be alone.

As we have already observed in a previous chapter, if Jesus often needed to be alone with his Father, how much more do we? Thus our time spent alone with the Lord in meditation and prayer is a good indicator of our priorities. If we say we are too busy to be with him, then we are too busy! Things must be changed. Discipline will be needed—perhaps the night before, in going to bed at a respectable hour so that time can be spent in the morning in prayer and the study of the Scriptures. It is just not possible to use our time aright if we are not setting ourselves priorities and determining in life which things are more important than others. We must be clear in our mind as to what things matter most:

Let us at all costs get our priorities clear and straight. Then we must write them into our daily and weekly time pattern, thereby ensuring that we make a habit of putting first things first.⁷

Discipline in our use of time will apply to how we spend our leisure hours as well as to our work time. Time can be

⁶ Sanders, *Problems of Christian Discipleship*, p. 120.

⁷ Godfrey Robinson & Stephen Winward, *The King's Business*, p. 29.

wasted in an over-indulgence in sport, recreation and amusements. We can also spend too much time socialising. All these need to be in balance. Clearly one of the great time-wasters is television—it demands our whole attention but nothing by way of participation. Though some programs may be excellent, the vast majority are rubbish. We need to be disciplined enough to get up and turn the set off after the good show is over and not just sit and watch all the junk that follows! How easy it is to write off a whole evening of 4 or 5 hours watching worthless TV! Be disciplined—turn the idiot box off when you know you should.

If you are young, then how you spend your time with your boyfriend or girlfriend will also need discipline. Mutual wasting of time seems to be so much easier to justify! Be considerate of your friend—they have responsibilities also and must be stewards of their time. By your slackness, you can be wasting not only your own time, but theirs also.

Being disciplined in the right use of time involves being punctual. Elisabeth Elliot writes:

I was brought up to believe that it is a sin to be late. To cause others to wait for you, my parents taught us, is to steal from them one of their most precious commodities. Time is a *creature*—a created thing—and a gift. We cannot make any more of it. We can only receive it and be faithful stewards in the use of it.⁸

That being the case we ought to plan our time, and not leave everything to ‘just happen’! One of my friends, when arriving late, said: ‘Better late than never’—to which I replied: ‘Better never late!’ Richard Taylor writes:

... the habit of being on time will never be acquired unless (1) you are convinced that Christian courtesy demands it—which

brings the issue into the realm of ethics; (2) you plan ahead, so that you know without guessing where you need to be and exactly when; (3) you allow yourself a generous margin of time.⁹

If being on time for appointments, meetings or other engagements is a problem for you, then learn to use a diary or an electronic organiser. Remember it is not just good manners to be on time for these things—we are representing Christ. So develop the good habit of being punctual. Make sure other people can always rely on you to be on time!

Business executives pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for their senior managerial staff to train at ‘Time Management’ seminars. They are taught how to organise their time so as to gain the maximum efficiency out of each day. They apply certain principles in order to establish priorities in their daily responsibilities so that no moment is wasted and the best possible financial outcome will be achieved each quarter for their corporation. Should not Christians be equally concerned about how to use their time each day in their service for the Lord? Are not our priorities far more important? Are not the ‘gains’ for us far more significant? Are not our goals and the benefits achieved of far greater value? Is not our perspective an eternal one?

The right use of time must involve getting our priorities right. There will always be far too many things in life that we want to do or are asked to do. We must learn to work out what things are really important and those which can be dropped or postponed. Oswald Sanders writes:

Much time which is not actually wasted is spent on things of only secondary importance. A fool has been described as the man

⁸ Elliot, *Discipline: The Glad Surrender*, p. 97.

⁹ Taylor, *The Disciplined Life*, p. 85.

who has missed the proportion of things. Some of us have the unfortunate tendency to be so engrossed in the secondary that we have no time left for the primary.¹⁰

Often we will find that we have failed to do things that we should have done and have been preoccupied with things that need not have been done. Under those circumstances, it is possible that we might be burdened with a sense of guilt or even remorse. All we can do is attempt to rectify the situation if at all possible. If not, we must refuse to be in bondage over the matter and just get on with life—determining, with God’s help, not to fail in that way again. Oswald Sanders again:

Our responsibility is concerned only with the factors which lie within our power to control. If we feel harassed and the pressure on us becomes too great, the time has arrived to take stock of our commitments and resolutely refuse more than we can discharge well and without undue strain.¹¹

Another aspect of having right priorities is being able to plan well ahead and so commit ourselves—months in advance—to those things which we know are important. For example: I have some friends who, sadly, have a well-established habit of never agreeing to take responsibilities in a meeting or some other function that is still months ahead. It is not that they don’t want to be involved, but that they have never learned to commit themselves to anything in advance! They wait until a few days before the time in order to see what the options might be! If there is nothing else more attractive going, then they get involved. That’s no way to order one’s priorities. Such a person is unlikely to be trusted by others. They will always be seen as unreliable

¹⁰ Sanders, *Problems of Christian Discipleship*, p. 122.

¹¹ Sanders, *Problems of Christian Discipleship*, pp. 124–5.

and therefore too great a risk when long-term commitments are required for a team or for some program needing to be planned well in advance. What does this say about that person’s understanding of Christian discipleship?

It is often as a result of our poor use of time and lack of planning that many of our guilts arise, driving us deeper and deeper into a life of disorder and frustration. *Determine today to stop wasting time.* Begin to plan your day, your work, your study, your leisure, so that there is a practical routine in which you can begin to live. Of course, you will not always stay with it. Unexpected interruptions will occur often. But rather than panicking, or being irritated, or despairing, just get back to it again as soon as possible. Maintain what I call a ‘disciplined flexibility’.

Since we do not know what tomorrow holds—or even if it will come for us—we ought to live ‘today’ as if it were our last! Jonathan Edwards wrote:

Particularly, we should live every day as conscientiously and as holily as if we knew it were the last. We should be as careful every day to avoid all sin, as if we knew that night our souls should be required of us. We should be as careful to do every duty which God requires of us, and take as much care that we have a good account to give to our Judge, of our improvements of that day, as if we concluded that we must be called to give an account before another day.¹²

The point is, we should never take tomorrow for granted.

The first evangelical Christian message I ever heard was in a little Scouts’ hall in Pennant Hills in 1956. The speaker was Deaconess Mary Andrews and she spoke on James:

Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and

¹² Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, p. 237.

Running the Race

making money.’ Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? *For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes* (James 4:13–14).

I was shocked. It had never occurred to me that my time was not my own. I had to face the fact that my life was but a mist that is here today and gone tomorrow. Prior to that afternoon I had never given any thought to eternal issues or to why I was here and where I was heading. It was the first occasion in my life when I was forced to think seriously about ‘time’ and how little there was of it for me to live my life.

Our life on this planet is finite. It will not last. We will all die one day. Our time here is really very short. Not only that, the day is coming when ‘time’ as we know it will have run out!

Then the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and the land raised his right hand to heaven and swore by him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it: ‘There will be no more delay, but in the days when the seventh angel is to blow his trumpet, the mystery of God will be fulfilled, as he announced to his servants the prophets’ (Rev. 10:5–7).

God is going to bring this era to an end in the day of judgment and the return of Christ. Thus ‘time’ will cease. We will be ushered into the everlasting realm of eternity. As mortals we have no idea quite what that will mean. All we can say is what the Scriptures tell us. That hour will come on us without warning:

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable

Ordering Our Time

body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality (1 Cor. 15:51–53).

Since we do not know at what hour Christ will return, we ought to be alert, using our time now with great care:

Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly (Mark 13:35–36).

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers (Rom. 13:11).

Back in the 1750s Jonathan Edwards once wrote of the sin and folly of procrastination:

God hath concealed from us the day of our death, without doubt, partly for this end, that we might be excited to be always ready, and might live as those that are always waiting for the coming of their Lord . . .

He went on to exhort his readers:

Now therefore let me, in Christ’s name, renew the call and counsel of Jesus Christ to you, to watch as those that know not what hour your Lord will come . . . Be exhorted therefore, for your own sakes, immediately to awake from the sleep of sin, out of sleep, and sleep no more, as not depending on any other day.—Let me exhort you to have no dependence on any future time; to keep every sabbath, and to hear every sermon, as if it were the last. And when you go into your closet, and address yourself to your Father who seeth in secret, do it in no dependence on any future opportunity to perform the same duty. When you that are young go into company for amusement and diversions, consider that it may be the *last* opportunity of the like nature that ever you may have. In all your dealings with your neighbours, act as if you

were never to make another bargain. Behave in your families every day, as though you depended on no other.¹³

Finally, let me follow Edwards's example and give this advice on the improvement of time:

- Improve the *present* time without delay. The more we procrastinate, the more time will be lost. 'I hurry and do not delay to keep your commandments' (Ps. 119:60).
- Improve those parts of time which are most precious. Holy times are more precious than common times. The time of youth is precious—much of life still lies ahead and there is much to be gained by using our time when young with greater care.
- Improve the use of your leisure times. Don't waste these times with useless activity. We have a responsibility to use every talent, advantage, and opportunity to our utmost, while time lasts.

19

Vocation and Work

Genesis chapter 1 records the decree which God gave to Man at the beginning in which he was commanded to be in charge of his whole creation:

God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth' (Gen. 1:28).

We read that God placed Adam and Eve in a 'garden' with the task of attending to it and keeping it in order: 'The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it' (Gen. 2:15).

It is hard for us to comprehend the stupendous task that God gave to Adam (and therefore to each of us) in that original mandate. We were destined to be working, functioning and cooperating *with* God in the great purpose he had decreed for his vast creation. There was nothing that God did not entrust to the control of Man—for we are told that *he put all things under our feet!*

Yet you have made them [Mankind] a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them

¹³ Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, p. 242.

dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet (Ps. 8:5-6).

Although the Fall of Man did nothing to change the decree of God, it did incapacitate us from being able to carry out the vocation he had given. Though we have been designed to work and be occupied with managing his creation, our defection from God has changed the *nature* of all forms of human work by turning it into toil:

And to the man he [God] said, 'Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, "You shall not eat of it," cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life' (Gen. 3:17).

Because 'work' is a divine vocation it is *natural* to the way we are as human beings. We work because God has structured us that way. Though that very work is now toil (and not always a delight), it does not change the fact that we are made to be occupied in this way. In our 'fallenness' it just means we now have to discipline ourselves to be working as we ought! The Psalmist puts it in a matter-of-fact way: 'People go out to their work and to their labor until the evening' (Ps. 104:23). So, when we do not work we are going against the way we have been created.

The Bible tells us that God 'worked' on his creation to bring his purposes to fruition:

And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation (Gen. 2:2-3).

Though that 'stage' of his creative activity was completed, God did not cease to be at work in and for his creation. He

continues to do so to this very day! Jesus said, 'My Father is still working, and I also am working' (John 5:17). He is constantly at work sustaining his creation, providing for it and maintaining it. He is at work bringing everything to the consummation. He is at work in the lives of billions of people right at this very moment! He is at work drawing men and women into his Kingdom. He is at work in our own lives right now, enabling us to live uprightly as his sons and daughters.

Paul reminded his readers, 'it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure' (Phil. 2:13). God is at work—and so too must we be. This means we should have a right theology of work. It must be one that will constantly shape our attitude to the various jobs we have to do in life and of how we understand the whole principle of labour in the light of God's vocation for us. Whatever our 'occupation' happens to be, we ought to view this in the light of the broader 'vocation' that God has given us. He is about the great purpose of bringing the nations into his Kingdom, and we must know that we have a role in that vast program. Our day-to-day work is not irrelevant, no matter how mundane or boring it sometimes may be. We are representing him in our jobs, in our occupations, in our work, in our tasks each day. It is right at this point that God's 'vocation' for us and our human 'occupation' meet and fuse as one in the life of the believer.

The divine mandate to work is not just working for ourselves or even so that we might provide for our family and loved ones. It is far broader than that. *It is working for any who are in need.* We work for those for whom our God-given gifts can be employed in order to meet their need at any point of time. This takes in the whole principle of our

‘duty’ to others. We serve others by seeing what we *ought* to do for them—driving them to a doctor’s appointment, mowing their lawns, doing their shopping, painting their house. All this is service to Christ. If we think some forms of work or service are below us, then we ought to remember that Christ washed his disciples’ feet (John 13:1–20). And he did this knowing that the Father had put all things into his hands (John 13:3).

There is no such thing as ‘Christian’ work. Christian work is *any* work done by a believer for their Lord whether they be a preacher or a garbage collector. This means that whatever vocation God has called us to, we can dedicate it to him. In this sense, then, no one is excluded from serving the Lord, and all our labours can be considered ‘Christian’ work! Irrespective of what vocation God has called us to, we ought to see it as working for him. Thus we ought to be competent in our job—honouring God by being the very best we can according to the ability he has given us:

Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters (Col. 3:23).

This passage clearly shows that all we do in our work and vocations as Christians is for the Lord—not just for our immediate bosses. If we are prone to complaining about our jobs or our boss or about how little we are ‘appreciated’, then we ought to review our perspective in the light of this verse. We are serving Christ, and this verse is a good basis for us developing a Christian understanding of work. When we devote our labour to the Lord, then even menial tasks take on a new meaning. We can know deep satisfaction in our work when we view it as being for Christ:

You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you (Ps. 128:2).

From the fruit of the mouth one is filled with good things, and manual labor has its reward (Prov. 12:14).

Just having the opportunity to work is a wonderful blessing—many in our world are not in that position. Having the *ability* to work is also a blessing for it is God’s gift to us. Elisabeth Elliot reminds us that not all have this ability:

Ask Joni Eareckson. She is paralyzed. She can no longer do the normal work given to the rest of us, but she has learned, through excruciating practice and discipline, to do things in extraordinary ways. She paints, holding the brush in her mouth. She drives a van specially adapted for her needs. She writes books, travels, speaks, works for the handicapped. To see her do these things against such terrific odds makes me aware of blessings I took for granted. My legs carry me where I want to go, my hands hold a vacuum cleaner, my fingers work—all ten of them—to fix my hair, knead bread, play the piano, type.¹

Today, we live in a climate where many able-bodied people don’t want to work so long as they can get away with it. And they certainly don’t want to *serve* others! We live in what might be called a ‘post-hard-work-era’. Many who do work are not interested in doing their jobs well or with any degree of conscientiousness. This can be tough going for the Christian who is determined to take up his/her responsibility in his/her work and to do it in the way God wants. It may mean going against the prevailing slack attitude of fellow workmates; it may mean standing up to a belligerent or unreasonable union boss; or it may mean refusing to do something unethical that is being demanded by one’s superior. It is essential that we come to terms with these issues and learn to live according to the word of God.

Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might (Eccl. 9:10).

¹ Elliot, *Discipline: The Glad Surrender*, pp. 133–4.

We need to be constantly expanding our horizons, developing our abilities, and using to the utmost the gifts God has given us. We ought to have the aim of being as competent as we possibly can be in our particular field of work. This means being disciplined in the face of a society which generally settles for second-best.

Discipline, self-control, enthusiasm—all are involved in fulfilling our vocation. Don't be afraid of hard work—of getting your hands dirty, of soiling your clothes. Throw yourself into it with all your energy! Be a person of integrity. Be known as someone who can be trusted, someone who can be relied upon, someone who will do their duty well without slacking off. The world needs to be confronted by men and women who have the guts and determination to work hard and be disciplined in staying with the task.

Because God has structured us to be occupied with work, we derive true meaning and purpose as persons when we engage in work. That's why to be unemployed is demoralising. It demeans. It is to be less than what we should be as true persons. This probably means that those who are unemployed are facing as much a spiritual problem as a social or financial one. But if someone is just plain lazy and will not work then they will suffer for their indolence. The writers of the various Proverbs had plenty to say of such a person!

Go to the ant, you lazybones; consider its ways, and be wise (Prov. 6:6).

The craving of the lazy person is fatal, for lazy hands refuse to labor (Prov. 21:25).

The appetite of the lazy craves, and gets nothing, while the appetite of the diligent is richly supplied (Prov. 13:4).

The way of the lazy is overgrown with thorns, but the path of the upright is a level highway (Prov. 15:19).

The lazy person does not plow in season; harvest comes, and there is nothing to be found (Prov. 20:4).

Of course, fallen Man does not see work in the way the Bible portrays it. Work is often little more than a means to an end—the pay packet. As we will see later, important though the pay packet may be, God did not structure us to work just in order to get paid for it. We work because that is what a human being does. Work is necessary for all of us because that's how God has made us. Idleness is therefore deadly. I hate having nothing to do. I have to be occupied all the time with some job or other—irrespective of whether I am being paid or not. In fact, some of the most satisfying and fulfilling jobs I have ever worked on have been those for which I knew I would receive no payment!

Once money becomes the prime motivation for working, then true creativity evaporates. I should not be working so much for what I can get out of it, than for what I can put into it of myself and my God-given gifts. I find fulfilment not so much in the kind of work I do, but in the *way* I do it.

Of course, I recognise that modern technology and production line boredom makes it very difficult for some people to find any work satisfaction or any sense of fulfilment. Pride in one's work—as was the case with the craftsmen of old—is rapidly vanishing in our automated age. Even secular minds are seeing this as a problem and are doing something about it, with team concepts and the notion of workers following a job through from start to finish rather than seeing themselves as mere items on a production line.

Here is another problem in our modern society: many young people are in jobs today only because that was all

that was available. They basically had no choice as to what work they could get at the time and don't particularly enjoy what they are doing. How should a Christian view his/her 'occupation' under these circumstances? What of those who, by choice or necessity, change their jobs a number of times and never seem to settle into any particular line of work? How are these believers to view their work in the light of God's 'vocation' for them? As Christians we need to think through these issues carefully and determine how we ought to respond to what is happening as a result of the changes that are taking place around us.

What is unique to the Christian view—as distinct from the common secular view—is that all is done for the sake of Christ. All is done to the glory of God. Even the boring, seemingly mundane is ultimately done for him. Our occupation, no matter what it may be, is part of God's overall purpose and vocation for us as those who are members of his family and inheritors of his kingdom. It is this eternal perspective which enables the disciplined Christian to keep going when others have long since given up and quit their jobs.

In relation to our job and work, there is another side to the coin. It is very easy to be so absorbed with our occupation that it becomes our god. We can become so enthralled with our vocation that it consumes us. Thus discipline is needed in keeping things in perspective so that we are not obsessed with our job to the detriment of health, family or our relationship with the Lord.

Of all people, Christians ought to be known for their willingness to work. They ought to be those who work hard—not fast, just *hard* (as the US industrialist, R. G. LeTourneau used to tell his employees). Paul spoke about his own perspective and priorities in this matter, and went out of his

way to make sure he was never a burden to those to whom he preached. He was disciplined and worked with his own hands even though he could have rightly expected others to support him financially. If he stayed overnight with someone, he always paid. He taught that if a man will not work, then he should not eat. And he backed it up by his own example:

For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living (2 Thess. 3:7-12).

We ought to recognise that God is going to call us to give an account of what we have done with the gifts and talents and abilities he has given us. He has designed us to work and has equipped each one of us to be able to do so. If we have been slack or lazy or irresponsible, then there will be little to show for our life in the end. We will have to face the Lord's 'Please Explain'! The parable of the 'talents' in Matthew is about stewardship and the right use of that which had been entrusted to three slaves by their master. Jesus taught this in the context of talking about the coming Kingdom:

Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off

and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money (Matt. 25:13–18).

In New Testament times a 'talent' was a unit of exchange. These three slaves had been entrusted with a certain number of talents to be used and invested while their master was absent. The number of talents each was given was commensurate with their ability and they were expected to use them for the benefit of their boss. The talents did not belong to the slaves but to their master—they were a loan, to be given back to him on his return.

The same principle might be applied to the gifts and abilities that have been entrusted to us. God has given each of us certain 'talents' to be used for him. They are not ours, but his gift. And they have been given according to our ability. This applies to those gifts which are 'natural' as well as to those which are 'spiritual'. The person who is a wonderful pianist has a natural gift—but it is still God-given. The person who prophesies has a spiritual gift—also God-given. As Christians we will give an account of how we have used these gifts—both natural and spiritual. That means we will have to be sure we are being disciplined now in working hard at our vocations—irrespective of what these happen to be.

The parable in Matthew continues:

After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' And

the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matt. 25:19–30).

The three slaves were faced with a reckoning when their master finally returned—he 'settled accounts' with them. The slave who had doubled his five talents was commended by his master as having been trustworthy in a few things. He was therefore rewarded with even greater responsibilities and opportunities. The second slave likewise was commended for being trustworthy and so was rewarded accordingly. The third slave had done nothing to advance his master's account. He had not squandered the one talent he had been given—he'd simply done nothing with it. He had buried it. The master castigated him as being both wicked and lazy. Whereas the other two had been obedient, the third slave was indolent and disobedient.

We dare not bury the gifts God has given us. We dare not be like that third slave and just give back the one

‘talent’ without ever having bothered to trade it or make it work for the Master. Therefore, in the context of work, we ought to be concerned that we use every day the abilities and gifts God has given us. We too will have to give an account when Christ returns to ‘settle accounts’.

It is clear from this parable that the Lord has given to all of us those ‘talents’ or gifts that are appropriate for us—neither more nor less:

We may rest assured, if we are the Lord’s servants, that he has bestowed upon us as many talents as we can rightly use, and quite as many as we shall be able to account for when he returns. The all-important matter for us is to be faithful to the trust committed to us.²

May we not be found wanting when he comes back, simply because we were too lazy to discipline ourselves to work hard at the vocations he has granted us in life.

Does this mean life is to be all work and nothing else? Surely not. God wonderfully made provision for us in the Sabbath and he set the creational principle for us to work six days out of seven:

Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work (Exod. 20:9–10).

Of God’s creative activity it is said that ‘on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed’ (Exod. 31:17). The principle of the Sabbath rest is set for us by God himself. Matthew Poole comments on this verse:

Was refreshed; not as if he had been weary with working, which surely he could not be with speaking a few words, nor can God be weary with any thing, Isa. xl. 28 [40:28]; but it notes

² Charles Spurgeon, *A Popular Exposition of Matthew*, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, London, 1962, p. 225.

the pleasure or delight God took in reflecting upon his works, *beholding that every thing he had made was very good*, Gen. i. 31.³

We need to take time out from our labour to rest and be refreshed. I have colleagues who never stop. They are workaholics. They work seven days a week, fifty-two weeks of the year. They are burning themselves out in their obsession for money or fame or fulfilment or just because they are perfectionists. But they are going against their Creator’s mandate.

I have a Christian friend who once told me he could never get through all the demands of his busy profession if he didn’t work on Sunday. He would not be able to keep ahead. He was always loaded down with more than he could handle. I suggested he take Sunday off—go to church, relax, have a nap in the afternoon, read an enjoyable book. He was sceptical but decided to try it. Today, years later, he never works on Sundays and says he gets through far more than he ever did when he was ploughing through work, seven days a week non-stop.

If our understanding of ‘work’ is to be biblical it must take into account our need for rest and renewal. It may take as much discipline for some to quit working nonstop, as it will for others to get started! Discipline in our work is vital if we are to be the persons God created us to be. We will never be satisfied or at peace if we don’t work hard, nor will we be able to live comfortably with ourselves and those around us if we overwork and are obsessed with our vocations.

³ Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 1, Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1962, p. 187.

20

Money Matters¹

I recall as a young Christian often singing a hymn which included the words, 'Take my silver and my gold, Not a mite would I withhold'. These were pious sentiments, but rarely backed by the reality of actually giving to the Lord in any way that could be described as sacrificial.

Christians should be good stewards of money. Sad to say, this is not always the case. It is not unusual for Christians to be not only very lax in money matters, but also to be very foolish in their financial dealings. Our discipline with regard to money should—as with everything else—be based on biblical principles. Once again, it is a question of perspective and priorities. We must guard against being sucked into the world's way of thinking—we are called to think with a spiritual mind, not with a secular mind. We are to have the mind of Christ in regard to the use of our money. Money can become a god to a Christian just as much as to anyone else. Remember, it is the *love* of money that is a root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:10).

¹ Much of the material in this chapter is covered in my book *The Grace of Giving*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2000.

It has been said that 'the last part of a Christian to be converted is his/her wallet or purse'.² Many Christians grow up without ever really thinking about giving. They have no plan or priority or perspective relating to Christian giving. What is given in the plate on Sunday is often just what is left over by way of spare cash at the time—if even that! Special occasions may evoke from them a burst of liberality, but, generally speaking, giving money to the work of the Lord and the furtherance of the Gospel does not figure much in their thinking.

As a result, the Church at large is often strapped for money. Missionary societies struggle to support Christian workers in our difficult times. Pastors and leaders are forced to resort to unbiblical and sometimes questionable means for raising finance just to keep their church or society functioning. The great thrust of the Gospel is seriously hampered by these deficiencies, and God's name is not honoured as it ought to be in a world desperate to see the reality of faith in those who claim to believe in a God of the impossible. From time to time some pastors attempt to whip up their congregations to give more. There are pleas for money during those occasions when things are getting tough. There are 'pleading letters' and other means by which leaders seek to extract more funds from their reluctant congregations!

At the other end of the scale there are those mega-churches (mostly in North America) where money is at the heart of everything. Nothing seems to matter more than money. The congregations are promised great 'rewards' for giving. They are told that they will be 'blessed' by God if they give. They will 'prosper' if they contribute liberally

² Rev. Michael Baughen, taped study on 2 Corinthians 8 – 9.

to the Lord's work. Such churches often appear to achieve extraordinary levels of giving, but those same churches may well support extravagant programs and be led by pastors with very expensive and lavish tastes.

A *biblical* view of the place of money is rarely held by Christians these days and so we need to think through our own attitude as to how we use what we have in relation to the teachings of Scripture. We are often ignorant of the fact that the Bible says much about money, and therefore our understanding of the subject is often distorted and misinformed. It may surprise some to discover that not only has the Bible a great deal to say on the subject but it also makes it very clear that spiritual blessings for the individual and the Church are tied in with a right attitude to money. This has to do with what we think money is for, how we use what we have, what our attitude is towards those who don't have any (i.e. the poor), how we view giving as an expression of our love to the Lord, and how much value we place on our obedience to the Lord's instructions concerning money. These are all important questions to consider. The fact is, our money, our possessions and all we own are God's gift to us and ought to be devoted to him. We need to heed Paul's questions, 'What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?' (1 Cor. 4:7).

Generally speaking, few pastors teach their congregations about what the Scriptures say concerning money. If they do, then it is often a superficial and brief 'sweep' over the subject, with little or no application. Of course, it is easy to see why some pastors would feel uneasy or embarrassed to be talking often about money. Many godly leaders shy away from the subject, fearing they might give the impression they are more interested in money than with so-called

'spiritual' matters. But they go to the opposite extreme and hardly ever say anything to their people on the subject.

The first record of a tithe in the Old Testament is of Abraham giving to the mysterious Melchizedek—king of Salem (Gen. 14:20). It was Jacob who vowed to give a tenth (a tithe) to the Lord after God renewed his covenant with him at Bethel:

... the LORD shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one tenth to you (Gen. 28:21–22).

Under the Old Testament Mosaic law, giving to the Lord was a tithe—one tenth of a person's income, crops or flocks. All participated. None were exempt:

All tithes from the land, whether the seed from the ground or the fruit from the tree, are the LORD's; they are holy to the LORD (Lev. 27:30).

As soon as the word spread, the people of Israel gave in abundance the first fruits of grain, wine, oil, honey, and of all the produce of the field; and they brought in abundantly the tithe of everything (2 Chron. 31:5).

Of course, Christians don't come under this legal code. We say we are under grace! But if grace does not draw out from us *at least* that which was there under the law, then perhaps something is wrong in our understanding of the extent of God's goodness to us. Surely a Christian would not want to give *less* than those under the law! Oswald Sanders puts everything in perspective when he says:

The basic question is not how much of *our money* we shall give to God, but how much of *God's money* we shall retain for ourselves.³

³ Sanders, *Problems of Christian Discipleship*, p. 65.

The starting point in our own giving should be an understanding of the biblical principles involved. In Second Corinthians chapters 8 and 9, Paul discusses the whole matter of Christian giving. He wished to remind the Corinthians that giving was a proof of the genuineness of the love they said they had. We would do well to ponder those two chapters in great detail. Paul shows that it is a grace-gift from God to be able to give. If we only think of giving money in natural, human terms, then we will miss the whole point of what God does in us by his Spirit to enable us to give aright. Paul cites the Christians of Macedonia who were enabled by God to actually give *beyond* their means—an extraordinary statement! In fact though, the Bible teaches that we are to give *according to our means*. We give as we are able to. If God calls us to give ‘beyond our means’, then that’s wonderful, but normally we are to give according to what we have:

And he shall offer, of the turtledoves or pigeons such as he can afford (Lev. 14:30).

According to their resources they gave to the building fund sixty-one thousand darics of gold, five thousand minas of silver, and one hundred priestly robes (Ezra 2:69).

The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea (Acts 11:29).

For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have (2 Cor. 8:12).

... all shall give as they are able, according to the blessing of the LORD your God that he has given you (Deut. 16:17).

Giving over and above a ‘tithe’ is an offering. It is a freely given offering out of deep gratitude and thanks. It may

occur on special occasions or be given at regular intervals. The whole point of what is being said is that giving to the Lord is grace-motivated or else it is just a duty. If it’s a duty, then it’s sure to be resented and the gift reluctantly given.

There was an occasion when Jesus was in the temple watching people giving. He was discerning the motive and the degree of sacrifice of the givers. A widow put in two coins which were *more in value* in the Lord’s estimate than all the abundant gifts of the rich:

He [Jesus] looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on’ (Luke 21:1–4).

In regard to giving, we should learn to plan ahead. Don’t look at what you can spare, and give that to God. That’s not giving. Plan your giving. Make up your mind as to what level you intend to give, and then be disciplined in giving regularly on that basis.

Years ago I remember hearing Bishop Alf Stanway talk about giving. He said: ‘Decide on the amount you think you could give, and then *double* it!’⁴ Well, it really does work, and God honours that sort of giving. The person who gives in abandon will find continual blessing. Give to the hilt, and God will match you more and more:

He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and *multiply* your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness (2 Cor. 9:10).

⁴ Bishop Alf Stanway was Anglican CMS bishop of Central Tanganyika in the mid 1960s.

You will be *enriched* in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us (2 Cor. 9:11).

So go the many promises of Scripture. Discover for yourself God's marvellous methods of multiplication!⁵

Then, too, our giving should be *proportional* to our income—one tenth or more! That proportion should be maintained as far as possible. Some people started giving, say, a dollar when they were young. Years later they are still giving only a dollar. What was once a sacrifice is now an insult to God. Our tithe needs to be constantly updated. It should be the *first* charge on our income. In other words, we budget for our tithe to come off our income *before* we think of spending on other things. Start doing it this week!

Don't be spasmodic in your giving. Once you have worked out how much you intend to give to the Lord, then be regular in that giving—weekly or monthly is a good working principle:

On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn (1 Cor. 16:2).

Don't give grudgingly. The Lord doesn't want anything from us that is not given freely and out of a heart of gratitude and thanksgiving:

Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment (Matt. 10:8).

Then the leaders of ancestral houses made their freewill offerings, as did also the leaders of the tribes, the commanders of the

⁵ Contrast this with the modern 'Prosperity Gospel' which advocates giving generously in order to be blessed by God. In other words, such giving is done not out of gratitude and thanksgiving but with the motive of getting more for oneself.

thousands and of the hundreds, and the officers over the king's work. They gave for the service of the house of God five thousand talents and ten thousand darics of gold, ten thousand talents of silver, eighteen thousand talents of bronze, and one hundred thousand talents of iron. Whoever had precious stones gave them to the treasury of the house of the LORD, into the care of Jehiel the Gershonite. Then the people rejoiced because these had given willingly, for with single mind they had offered freely to the LORD; King David also rejoiced greatly (1 Chron. 29:6–9).

Jesus warned against making a show of giving. Many Christians choose to give anonymously. That's a good policy. There should be no ostentation in our giving to the Lord:

But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing (Matt. 6:3).

Regardless of circumstances, real giving comes from the heart, and always overflows in its generosity. God loves the cheerful giver. He loves the liberal giver. It is an expression of their love and gratitude towards him. It reflects back to him the unbridled liberality of his giving to us:

Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for *God loves a cheerful giver* (2 Cor. 9:7).

According to Romans chapter 12, to be able to give generously is a gift of grace. Obviously not all are able to give in the same way, but we all ought to give as God enables us:

We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us . . . the exhorter, in exhortation; *the giver, in generosity*; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness (Rom. 12:6, 8).

On the basis of Christ's total giving of himself to us, we ought to be sacrificial in our giving to him:

For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9).

But King David said to Ornan, 'No; I will buy them for the full price. I will not take for the LORD what is yours, nor offer burnt offerings that cost me nothing' (1 Chron. 21:24).

As Christians we must learn to use money wisely and responsibly, recognising its value and importance in our lives, but without being a slave to it. We should employ the best and most applicable means for saving, accounting and spending our money. The Christian should not be wasteful or extravagant, nor, on the other hand, miserly. We should seek the Lord and discover how we should be using our money, our wealth, our possessions. We should give careful attention to our responsibility to share our wealth with others as God leads us.

When we are disciplined in our giving, one of the first things we will discover is that God has a blessing for us *in* giving. New and exciting things will happen, not only in our life, but also in the lives of others as a result of our tithing. God is no man's debtor:

... the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully (2 Cor. 9:6).

When we give freely and willingly to the Lord, we soon discover that we receive back from the Lord blessings—in abundance! This is not to say that we give in order to get. I remember the American industrialist Robert G. Le Tourneau once saying: 'If you give because it pays, then it won't pay'. If we give in order to gain some favour or blessing from God then we may discover that we have neutralised

our gift! No, we give out of love and gratitude to our Lord, and he wonderfully and marvellously honours that in a multitude of ways:

Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due, and only suffer want (Prov. 11:24).

Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor (Prov. 22:9).

... if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday (Isa. 58:10).

The Lord actually invites us to test him out on this matter! There was a period when the people of Israel had become slack and even deceitful in their giving. They tithed to the Lord only out of the unwanted, worthless leftovers. In effect they were robbing him (see Mal. 3:8–9). But in his grace he invited them to bring their full tithe to him and to prove his generosity! He invited them to experience his blessing being poured out on them to such an extent they would not have room enough to receive it!

Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing (Mal. 3:10).

Some Christians are very rich by the world's standards. They face particular temptations and pitfalls. The Bible warns such ones in the following terms:

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the

treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life (1 Tim. 6:17–19).

Put no confidence in extortion, and set no vain hopes on robbery; if riches increase, do not set your heart on them (Ps. 62:10).

At the other end of the social scale are those Christians who are relatively poor by the world's standards. Such ones are encouraged to be content with what they have and not to covet the 'riches' of others. Ultimately, the Lord will provide all we shall ever need:

I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread. They are ever giving liberally and lending, and their children become a blessing (Ps. 37:25–26).

Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you' (Heb. 13:5).

Money, probably more than anything else in life, can seduce us and draw us away from the Lord. Far from using our money for his honour and glory, we begin to love and worship money. In so doing we shall have fallen into the deadly money trap!

The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity (Eccl. 5:10).

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains (1 Tim. 6:10).

Be disciplined in using your money in God's way for his glory, and come to know and experience his blessing on your life in a whole new dimension:

Honor the LORD with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine (Prov. 3:9–10).

... give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back (Luke 6:38).

You may have thought the use of your money is ultimately your own business and not really something that impacts your life at a 'spiritual' level. I hope I have shown that that is not true. It's an illusion. I have seen many Christians grow cold for their Lord simply because the love of money eventually got the better of them. *Take great care that this does not happen to you!*

Habit Patterns

In previous chapters we have looked at the need to be disciplined in regard to our prayer life, in our reading and studying of the word of God, in our worship; in the use of our time, in how we work and approach our vocation, in the use of our money; and so on. All these areas of our life demand some level of self-discipline if they are to be maintained with any degree of regularity and meaning. This brings us to the subject of habit patterns. Our self-discipline is of little value if it is only spasmodic. We need to develop routines that are part of our life and become settled habit patterns which mould the way we live and what we do for the Kingdom of God.

When we do something long enough and often enough, it becomes part of us—for good or for ill. It becomes a habit. Little things learned in childhood are now so much a part of us that we just do them automatically without even thinking about them. At the same time, other things *not* learned in childhood—and which should have been—are now almost impossible to get hold of easily, such as adding up or multiplying or spellin correctlee.

Charles Spurgeon spoke of the effect of bad habits developing in one's life:

One of these days you may be unable to get rid of those habits which you are now forming. At first the net of habit is made of cobweb; you can soon break it through. Before long it is made of twine. Soon it will be made of rope. And last of all it will be strong as steel, and you will be fatally ensnared.¹

We all develop these patterns in life—these habits—and it becomes very important as to whether they are good or bad. Though we may not realise it, they form a significant aspect of our Christian witness. If you are still fairly young and have become a Christian, then you have been given a fantastic opportunity by the Lord to develop good habit patterns for the life ahead. You are especially blessed if your parents have provided good models for you to follow—by way of teaching as well as example. The writer of Proverbs testified to the instruction he received as a lad from his father, for to obtain and live in wisdom is to be prized more than anything else:

When I was a son with my father, tender, and my mother's favorite, he taught me, and said to me, 'Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commandments, and live. Get wisdom; get insight: do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth. Do not forsake her [wisdom], and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you. The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever else you get, get insight. Prize her highly, and she will exalt you; she will honor you if you embrace her. She will place on your head a fair garland; she will bestow on you a beautiful crown' (Prov. 4:3–9).

The Book of Proverbs is a goldmine of instruction in the development of a godly life with habit patterns flowing from submission to the wisdom of God:

¹ Spurgeon, *Spurgeon at His Best*, p. 93.

Take my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold; for wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her. I, wisdom, live with prudence, and I attain knowledge and discretion (Prov. 8:10–12).

As we learn to live in the light of God’s truth and wisdom, our ways will become more and more aligned to his word. This means that all of us—irrespective of age—need to consider carefully the personal areas and activities of our day-to-day life, because these all reflect something of what we are (or are not) in likeness to Christ. How others perceive us has a huge bearing on what they think of Christ. Our witness to the world often has far more to do with what we are and how we behave than with what we say:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal (1 Cor. 13:1).

Ask yourself these sorts of questions: How do I dress? Is my clothing sloppy, untidy or dirty? (That does not mean you have to be in your Sunday best to look good! Even old clothes can be neat and respectable.)² Do I pay adequate attention to my personal hygiene? Do I shower or take a bath regularly—particularly in summer? Do I consider others and change my clothes regularly and perhaps use a pleasant deodorant? What about cleaning my teeth, washing my hair, doing my hair, cleaning my shoes, mending torn or worn clothes—and so on?

² Here is a problem! Is the ‘dress’ of some Christian teenagers today a matter of culture or is it laziness and lack of discipline? What I think is untidy or unacceptable may not be seen that way by them. My question is this: Do they have a low view of God’s holiness so that, for them, nothing really matters?

Let me address young people here: Do you keep your room clean? Do you put things away or leave them scattered all over the floor? When they *are* put away, do you do it, or does your mother? Do you make your bed every morning, or is that left for mum to do as well? If your parents are not Christians, and you don’t care about these things, then is that a good witness to them? Of course, it could be that an untidy middle-aged person (who doesn’t have a mother to put things away for them) ought to face the same questions!

We all need to ask ourselves: Do I get enough sleep? Do I stay up unnecessarily late at night, watching TV, out with others, reading, or just because that’s what others do? Do I sleep in when I know I should be up and about? Am I disciplined in getting the *right* amount of sleep? Am I just plain lazy?

Do I eat wholesome food, or mainly junk? Am I a fastidious eater—fussy over what is otherwise perfectly good food? Have I been spoiled in my eating likes and dislikes? Am I a glutton? Do I gorge myself every time I eat? Am I a pig in the *way* I eat? Do I use my hands to eat, instead of the knife, fork and spoon? Do I wipe my hands on my clothes rather than on a serviette? Do I consider good manners in my eating habits to be important? Do I know what good manners are?

If you are a male, then do you sit down at the table before the ladies—or do you think such a thing is just old fashioned nonsense? What if you are invited for a meal to the home of non-Christian friends, and they happen to think these things *are* important: Would you know what to do? Would you care? What would you do at a formal dinner hosted by these non-Christians if you were confronted by an array of knives, forks and spoons for the various

dishes? For their sake, *and for your witness to Christ*, would it not be a good idea to get a few clues beforehand?

What about health matters? Ask yourself these questions: Do I exercise adequately? Or too much? Or not at all? Am I unwell because I don't take good care of my body? Do I look after myself properly? Do I relax adequately or am I 'on the go' all the time? Am I a work addict? Or am I the opposite? Do I try to maintain a healthful balance between work and recreation? Do I think it important?

How do I drive my car or ride my motorbike? Like a madman? Irresponsibly? Within the law? Am I considerate of others on the road? Do I insist on my rights? Am I an impatient driver? What would Christ think of my way of driving if he were sitting in the passenger seat next to me? Would I have to change my present way of driving?

Am I reliable? Can others count on me? When I give my word to do something for someone else, am I diligent in carrying out that promise? Am I a person of integrity? Can my word be trusted? Do I heed the injunctions of Scripture, such as those given in Proverbs?

Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. So you will find favor and good repute in the sight of God and of people (Prov. 3:3-4).

What is desirable in a person is loyalty, and it is better to be poor than a liar (Prov. 19:22).

Am I the sort of person who will always seek to do what is right in any given circumstance, irrespective of whether or not others are around to observe my actions? Am I courteous towards others? Am I well-mannered in all my

dealings with other people? Do I consider courtesy and good manners to be an important part of my witness to others? Paul thought so:

Remind them to . . . speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone (Titus 3:2).

What is your attitude at home? This is a question that everyone in the family ought to think over—husbands and wives in their relationships, children to parents, parents to children:

And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph. 6:4).

Young people, how do you relate to your parents, to your brothers and sisters, to your grandparents and relatives? Do you *honour* your parents? Do you *love* your parents?

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother'—this is the first commandment with a promise: 'so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth' (Eph. 6:1-3).

Do you only do things after being asked three or four times? Do you ever take the initiative and get in first to just do what you know only too well has to be done? Or do you leave it to others? Do you always think it is someone else's turn?—at least, is that the excuse you give? Are you just plain lazy at home? Do you ever wash up the dishes, vacuum the house, do the lawns, put out the rubbish bin, help do the washing or bring the clothes in? Would you sit and ignore the sudden rainstorm, knowing that the clothes were on the line?—or would you not even think of it because that's not your job?

What are you like at school, at Uni, or at work? What is your attitude? Do you really represent Christ, or would others never guess in a million years that you are a Christian? Does your lifestyle give them any clue, even if you don't have occasion to speak of him? Are you consistent in your study, your work, your job? Think about Paul's instructions to those who (in his day) were slaves:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free (Eph. 6:5–8).

Are you a person characterised by a negligent attitude? By tardiness? By brashness? Are you a smart alec? Do you really think you are better than others? Do you think you are smarter than others? Do you think you are more handsome/beautiful than others? Do you think you are less handsome/beautiful than others? What is your self-image? Are you a humble person? (Answer that one!)

Take a good, long, honest look at yourself and work out where you are as a Christian. Don't pretend. For once, face the truth about yourself. Forget about others for the moment. This means you! Be prepared to admit things to yourself if that is what is necessary:

Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? —unless, indeed, you fail to meet the test! (2 Cor. 13:5).

We must recognise that our habit patterns make us to be the persons we are, and will all the more determine the persons we will become. See clearly that self-discipline is

needed at all levels and in all departments of our life if we are to develop habit patterns that are Christ-like and God-honouring. If you are young, recognise that you are setting the tone of your life *now*. You are shaping your future *today*. Right now, you are moulding yourself to be the person you will become.

If you are prepared to be disciplined according to the word of God and under the direction of the Holy Spirit, you will become a more beautiful person still! Something of the glory of Christ will be seen in you. Something of the fragrance and grace of Christ will be there in your life. Men and women will be drawn to Christ by seeing him in you. Some quite little thing may trigger off faith—like the woman who said of George Whitefield: 'Mr. Whitefield was *so cheerful* that it tempted me to become a Christian'.³ Perhaps it will be the way you smile, or your positive attitude, or your neat appearance, or your courtesy at that meeting, or just that little thing you did for the neighbour last year.

Remember, we are representing Christ all the time—every moment of every day. We must remind ourselves constantly that 'we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us' (2 Cor. 5:20). What we are and just how we represent him to those around us, will depend largely on the disciplined habit patterns that we have developed over the years. Of course, it is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit to shine through us, but if we are slack and undisciplined in our habits then that witness will send mixed signals to the non-Christians with whom we have to brush shoulders every day:

³ *Select Sermons of George Whitefield*, Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1959, p. 29.

Come to a sober and right mind, and sin no more; for some people have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame (1 Cor. 15:34).

We may say certain things that are the truth of the Gospel, but will others see that same truth in us by what we do and by how we behave? Never forget that the only ‘Bible’ some people will ever ‘read’ will be you! Your quality of life and conduct is therefore of immense importance. Habit patterns and the development of a life that reflects Christ do not happen overnight. It takes discipline and care and a persevering resolve to be a walking ‘Bible’!

Never lose sight of the fact that the tapestry of a beautiful life is woven from many threads. Set out deliberately to be in line with what God is doing in your life as you discipline yourself in response to his leading. Deliberately aim at ordering your life in such a way that it will be constantly touching the lives of others, drawing them to faith in Jesus Christ:

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world (Phil. 2:12–15).

A really good habit to get into is that of setting aside Sunday as a day in which to worship the Lord, grow in him, be in his presence, draw aside from the world, and to serve and minister to one another. Of course, every day is the Lord’s, but it’s a good practice to make Sunday a special day. It is one day in the week which we can make

particularly the Lord’s—for his honour and our good! Jesus taught his followers: ‘The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath’ (Mark 2:27, AV). In other words, this day is for our benefit. It is there to serve us, not so that we have to slavishly serve it! It is not a ‘law’ that we must observe, but rather a wonderful gift of God’s goodness. This means we should take seriously the biblical, *creational* principle of one day in seven as a God-given day of rest from our normal toil, and as a time to be refreshed in the things of the Spirit.

Since some people may have jobs which demand they work on Sundays, some other day ought to be set aside so as to retain the one-in-seven principle. God knows we *need* it! Personally, I have always tried to avoid jobs that required me to work on Sundays. I have just made the decision that I will not work on that day if I can avoid it, and I am deeply grateful to God for that habit pattern which began in my youth. However, not all have that freedom of choice in their line of employment. I would advise, as best as you are able according to your particular circumstances, to be disciplined in your use of Sundays and learn to explore all the possibilities of using that day to the full as God intended it.

Finally, the following are some helpful questions that we might ask ourselves concerning our conduct, habits and lifestyle patterns—especially when we are not sure of what to do in any given situation:

(a) Will it bring glory to God?

The first question in the Westminster Catechism asks: ‘What is the chief end of Man?’ Answer: ‘To glorify God and enjoy him forever’. Is what I am doing and how I am living glorifying to God? Have I developed

habit patterns that dishonour him? Are the things I do, and the way in which I live, conducive to bringing others to recognise his glory in me?

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31).

(b) Is it profitable?

The apostle Paul knew that, for him, all things were lawful. But he did not engage in certain activities because he also knew they would not be helpful in the long run. And so he just didn't do them. The same is likely to be true for us. There are many things in life that seem legitimate, but ultimately it would be best if we let them pass us by. Just don't get involved. For example, I made that resolve when I was a young Christian in regard to pop music. I made the conscious decision to develop a habit of not listening to it! I did not think it would be profitable to do so. That whole generation of pop music just passed me by—including The Beatles! Was there anything wrong with the music? Probably not. Would it have been wrong of me to have listened to it? I doubt it. The questions I asked myself at the time were: 'Can I do without this and still survive as a human being?' 'Will this build me up in the faith?' 'Will this build up others in the faith?'

'All things are lawful,' but not all things are beneficial. 'All things are lawful,' but not all things build up (1 Cor. 10:23).

(c) Does it tend to enslave?

Once again there are lots of things in life with which we can become involved, but which only end up

enslaving us. Paul knew of this danger and voiced it in these words:

'All things are lawful for me,' but not all things are beneficial. 'All things are lawful for me,' but I will not be dominated by anything (1 Cor. 6:12).

Oswald Sanders gives an example:

... secular reading can so enslave a reader that it vitiates [corrupts] his appetite for the reading of the Word of God and spiritual books. Such a condition must be jealously guarded against by strict self-discipline both as to the quality and the quantity of our secular reading.⁴

Another good example of the enslaving power of a bad habit is that of watching too much television! When TV first came out I was mesmerised by it. Whereas I used to spend all my spare time reading Christian books and writing and preparing studies, TV took over. I had to make a huge effort to resist that intrusion and learned to turn it off. But over the years it began to dominate my spare time once again—so much so that at one stage I had to get rid of the set altogether. It was a drastic measure, but that move rescued me from being enslaved to something that was becoming dangerously counterproductive in my life as a Christian. In today's culture, watching TV sport, playing computer and TV games and being preoccupied with the Internet, are all potential snares to the young Christian, and I suspect many will be enslaved to these bad habits—thus jeopardising or undermining their spiritual growth.

⁴ Sanders, *Problems of Christian Discipleship*, p. 71.

(d) Will it strengthen or weaken me against temptation?

Is what I am doing only leading me into temptation? Am I going down a path that will ultimately land me in trouble? Am I exposing myself to temptation? Have I developed habit patterns that I know could lead me into sin? Is my lack of discipline only making provision for the flesh? In other words, am I deliberately leaving the door slightly open so that I can indulge a bad habit in the hope that I will get away with it? If so, I need to heed Paul's words:

Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires (Rom. 13:14).

Dr G. Campbell Morgan once said:

. . . the things which hinder are not necessarily low or vulgar. They may be in themselves noble things, intellectual things, beautiful things. But if our participation in any of these dims our vision of the ultimate goal in the purpose of God, holds us in our running, makes our going less determined and steady, they become weights and hinder.⁵

(e) Is it characteristic of the world or of the Father?

Is my proposed course of action characteristic of the world or is it something that accords with the character of the Father?

Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world (1 John 2:15–16).

Our habit patterns are incredibly important in determining what we become in life. They also determine what we shall be in the life to come. Remember William James's statement quoted in an earlier chapter:

Sow a thought, and you reap an action,
Sow an action, and you reap a habit,
Sow a habit, and you reap a character,
Sow a character, and you reap a destiny.

Be disciplined! Learn to develop good habit patterns!

⁵ Quoted in Sanders, *Problems of Christian Discipleship*, p. 71.

22

Self-Control in Relationships

Every day we interact with other fallen human beings like ourselves. And every day we are faced with the problem of rightly relating one with the other.

As Christians, our role is to be representing Christ to others. We are his ambassadors. This is not just to those we love, or at least, to those we like. It is also to those who irritate us—to those we don't even like and to those who are unlovely, as such. We often think it is our job to try and change others so that they will be like us—that is, to make them think the way we think! We must come to see, as another has said:

God did not make this [other] person as I would have made him. He did not give him to me as a brother for me to dominate and control, but in order that I might find above him the Creator. Now the other person, in the freedom with which he was created, becomes the occasion of joy, whereas before he was only a nuisance and an affliction. God does not will that I should fashion the other person according to the image that seems good to me, that is, in my own image; rather in his very freedom from me God made t

his person in His image. I can never know beforehand how God's image should appear in others. That image always manifests a completely new and unique form that comes solely from God's free and sovereign creation.¹

How much we need the discipline of obedience and faith in order to love people just as they are! We are to love them as those for whom Christ died, rose again and brought forgiveness and life. We must therefore learn to see the *worth* of others. We must see beyond their sins, their worldliness, their secular minds, their idiosyncrasies, their unloveliness. We must set out to be to them a true friend—to see them as Christ sees them, feel for them as he feels for them, and minister to them as he would minister:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that

¹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 83.

are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life (Matt. 25:31-46).

Instead of making demands on others, we should be seeking to serve them.

What I *am* as a person in my relationship with others is of profound importance in the long-term perspective of things. As we saw in the last chapter the only 'Bible' some will ever 'read' will be you and me! We must take care to see that our life is reflecting God's character at all times. It is not our role to change people; that is the prerogative of the Holy Spirit alone.

This whole matter of being disciplined in our relationships extends over the full spectrum of all those with whom we interact each day. It involves husbands and wives, parents and children, girlfriends and boyfriends, employees and employers, and so on. In other words, if I am a disciplined person, I will be a better husband/wife to my partner; I will be a better mother/father to my children; I will be a better son/daughter to my parents; I will be a better employee/employer to those over/under me. A godly discipline brings into my life a proper recognition of what I should be in relationship to other persons. My example of discipline and obedience will be an encouragement to others. It may evoke discipline in them which might not otherwise eventuate.

For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you (John 13:15).

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus (Rom. 15:5).

Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you (Phil. 4:9).

This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate (2 Thess. 3:9).

Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity (1 Tim. 4:12).

Show yourself in all respects a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, gravity and sound speech that cannot be censured; then any opponent will be put to shame, having nothing evil to say of us (Titus 2:7-8).

As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord (James 5:10).

Under this same heading of discipline in relationships, we need to consider the mass of teaching in the New Testament epistles which talk about the *ways* in which we should relate to one another. For example, look up the following passages and work out what specific issues are being raised in the matter of relationships: Romans 12:3-21; 13; 14; Ephesians 4:25-32; 5:1-33; 6:1-9; Philippians 2:14-16; Colossians 3:5-25; 4:1-6; James 4:11-12; 1 Peter 2:1, 12-18; 3:1-9.

Among Christian brethren, this discipline in relationships includes the whole subject of ministry. We have touched on this in an earlier chapter, but we must remember that we are called to minister to one another as members of

the body of Christ. To each believer, God has given a gift or gifts *in order* that we might be equipped to build one another up in the faith. Therefore, in our relationship with other Christians, we are to be disciplined in the right use of these gifts, since they are first and foremost for them—not for us! This subject is covered in Romans chapter 12, 1 Corinthians chapters 12, 13 and 14, and in Ephesians chapter 4.

Look at the follow passages and see how the gifts are given for building up each other:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit *for the common good* (1 Cor. 12:4–7).

... those who prophesy speak to other people *for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation* (1 Cor. 14:3).

Now I would like all of you to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. One who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, *so that the church may be built up*. Now, brothers and sisters, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I *benefit* you unless I speak to you in some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching? (1 Cor. 14:5–6).

So with yourselves; since you are eager for spiritual gifts, strive to excel in them *for building up the church* (1 Cor. 14:12).

For you may give thanks well enough, but the other person is not *built up*. I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you (1 Cor. 14:17–18).

What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done *for building up* . . . For you

can all prophesy one by one, *so that all may learn and all be encouraged* (1 Cor. 14:26, 31).

In chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians Paul teaches that all these gifts are to be exercised in love, otherwise they are of no value at all. They are pointless without love. It takes discipline to learn to exercise our God-given spiritual gifts in love—when and how he desires. The undisciplined use of these gifts is why many churches today are in such disorder.

Still under the same heading of discipline in relationships is the matter of authority. God calls all of us to come under the authority of others in one way or another. Children under parents, employees under employers, citizens under governments, and so forth. What we must recognise is that God has structured things so that *all* authority ultimately goes back to him. That means all authorities are authorities delegated *from God*. **How we respond to those in authority over us, is how we respond to God!** Think carefully then how you relate to others who are in authority over you!

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment (Rom. 13:1–2).

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’—this is the first commandment with a promise: ‘so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth’ (Eph. 6:1–3).

Some of us are given the task of exercising authority over others. It is a question of trust. God entrusts to us the

role—delegated from him—of being over others as he is over us. We must serve in this capacity with disciplined humility and integrity, not ‘lording’ it over those under us, but serving and leading them in wisdom:

... whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant (Mark 10:43).

Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart (Col. 3:21).

Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven (Col. 4:1).

In the last chapter we talked briefly about integrity. This is an old-fashioned quality not much in vogue today. It is not easy to be a man or woman of integrity in today’s society. It takes discipline and courage. It means standing up against the tide of popular belief which says that truthfulness, honesty, fair dealing and the like, are out of date. They are not important. It’s every man for himself. A lie here and there is not worth worrying about. Breaking promises? So what! Who cares? Christians have to be strong in the Lord on these issues. Many questions are not clear-cut and the traps are very subtle. It is so easy to get caught—so easy to get sucked in and not realise it. I must come to be known as a person who can be trusted.

Ask yourself the following questions: Do I always tell the truth? Do I always keep my word? Do I keep my promises? When I say I will be there on time—am I? Do I have a trustworthy character? Am I a reliable person? Do people place their trust in me because they know beforehand that I will be worthy of that trust? Do I think such trust only applies to the big things in life and not to the small things as well? *Am I known as a person of integrity?*

Such a reputation does not come overnight! Nor do I become known and accepted as such by just telling people that’s what I am. Trust has to be *earned*. We have to work at winning people’s confidence. That takes hard discipline and considerable sacrificial effort, especially where it is in the face of suspicion and distrust on the part of others. The world generally cannot believe that some people actually tell the truth! No one really believes that there are those who don’t cheat on their income tax returns! For this reason many people think there is a catch to it when another person seems to be acting honourably. They think they are being sucked in when someone is honest and open with them and appears to be telling the truth!

Thus we live in a back-to-front world. Black is white and white is black. For the Christian, this can mean very hard going indeed, and often the battle does not seem worth it. But it all comes back to the worth of others, and of the need for us to be *real* persons in our relationship with others. Try simply to be what God wants you to be. Only then will you be a person of integrity. Live it out. Let the world see the reality of it. God will be honoured. Some will find Christ because of it:

But you have upheld me because of my integrity, and set me in your presence forever (Ps. 41:12).

Whoever walks in integrity walks securely, but whoever follows perverse ways will be found out (Prov. 10:9).

The integrity of the upright guides them, but the crookedness of the treacherous destroys them (Prov. 11:3).

Better the poor walking in integrity than one perverse of speech who is a fool (Prov. 19:1).

The righteous walk in integrity—happy are the children who follow them! (Prov. 20:7).

Show yourself in all respects a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, gravity, and sound speech that cannot be censured; then any opponent will be put to shame, having nothing evil to say of us (Titus 2:7-8).

Integrity and discipline are nowhere more needed than in our relationships with the opposite sex. The Christian life of two young people can often come crashing down because of sexual failure. What starts out as a casual and natural friendship between a boy and girl may ripen into a warm and close relationship. Then an intimacy develops that should have been reserved for marriage. At first it seemed so innocent—a little ‘petting’, a casual exploring of the other person’s body. Then came the night they slept together at the relative’s place they were minding during the holidays. It all seemed so apparently innocuous. But not really. It was the beginning of a fatal declension in their spiritual lives. They had opted for the world’s way of doing things and had dishonoured their Lord by going against a fundamental biblical principle.

The present social climate says ‘anything goes’. Our TV programs portray the most intimate of sexual scenes and we have become anaesthetised as to what is appropriate and what is not. But social standards are not to be the basis for the standards of the Christian. Biblical principles apply to our sexual life as much as to anything else.

God has made us what we are as male and female human beings. He has given us the drives and desires that relate to the sexual. But he has also ordained that these be expressed and known in all their fullness and pleasure only in marriage, not before. When we try to get *before* marriage what can only be rightly known *in* marriage, then when marriage comes, we have blown it. The marriage has been white-anted before it even begins. Huge guilts result from

sexual failure before marriage. The husband secretly wishes his wife had not given in to him, and she secretly despises him for having taken advantage of her. The deep resentments rarely come to the surface because both feel guilt for their part in the affair and can’t speak about it honestly to each other.

Even if guilt relating to illicit sexual relationships is not ‘felt’ as such, it is nevertheless there. It is a creational principle that has been violated and existential guilt will be at work, having its deteriorating effect on the relationship. Only God’s grace and forgiveness can bring release and so restore the marriage to what it should have been from the beginning.

Christians need to be determined in their resolve to be restrained in their relationships with others to whom they may be attracted physically and/or sexually. God knows about these pressures and has not left us to just try and cope alone. He has given us the resources of the Holy Spirit to maintain our discipline, and he has given us marriage in order to have these right and proper desires come to fulfilment.

Christian young people need to make up their minds as to whether they intend to live by God’s word or by the pagan standards of the world around them. A choice for the latter will only bring pain and hardship, and more often than not, spiritual shipwreck.

I have personally known many young people who were once fervent for the Lord and knew and loved him with great ardour. They set out to serve him and to order their lives according to his will. Then, apparently without warning, they ‘fell in love’ with a non-Christian. The infatuation always seemed to grow with great speed. In every case they were convinced they could win their friend over to the

Lord. No amount of advice from fellow-believers could persuade them that it was dangerous. They were suddenly blind to such warnings. Gradually their interest in spiritual things declined. In time they married and drifted away from the church. Their partner never came to faith. Now they are both as pagan as their unbelieving neighbours.

We have to recognise that Satan is incredibly clever in these matters. One of his prime methods in undermining keen young Christians and in diverting them from the ways of God is to get them involved with a non-Christian of the opposite sex, or at least with a Christian who is not so keen about serving the Lord as they are. Either way, the spiritual brakes are effectively applied and their Christian life often ends up on the rocks, or seriously compromised.

These principles apply to adults too! How often the enemy works on one partner of a troubled marriage by arranging for a 'sympathetic Christian friend' of the opposite sex to help them. Instead of being disciplined he/she falls into the trap and so begins to spend time with this other person. Their counsel seems so helpful and loving. Surely it can't be a bad thing? Before long an 'inordinate affection' develops between them, and this becomes the thin edge of the wedge that sometimes worsens the marriage breakdown and may eventually lead to divorce.

These great issues of sexual and moral relationships are too important to be taken lightly. Either we see the necessity for discipline and obedience as believers, or else we treat the whole matter with indifference—as does the world.

Integrity and discipline should flow out of our love for the Lord and our desire to serve and obey him without question. He knows

that we are weak and frail. He knows that we are tempted in the sexual department. He knows that we have great drives and feelings. He is not expecting us to deny these pressures. What he does want us to do is trust him with our lives. Young 'singles' are to trust him to provide them with the right partner at the right time. They should pray that he will lead them to that one, and meantime, to remain disciplined. Marrieds are to trust him to maintain them through the rough times of their life together as well as in the good times.

Let me say a word here about homosexuality. We live in a culture in which homosexual relationships are becoming more and more accepted as a viable 'alternative lifestyle'. Young people are being told these days that to have homosexual feelings is quite appropriate and normal—if that happens to be the way you have been born. If you feel sexually attracted to someone of your gender, then that's quite OK. Go for it! This is a fallacy. I may as well say I have been born with feelings of covetousness and therefore I can't help myself from stealing!

As Christians, we must know what we believe in this regard. The Bible is quite clear about homosexuality being an abhorrence to God, and there were drastic penalties under the Old Testament law for any violation:

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination (Lev. 18:22).

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them (Lev. 20:13).

In Romans chapter 1 Paul shows that God's wrath is upon men and women who suppress the truth and refuse to honour him as God by worshipping him aright and by living as he has ordained. Among the examples he gives is homosexuality:

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error (Rom. 1:26–27).

In this *NRSV* translation of Paul's statement, the word 'error' is used to describe homosexual conduct. It comes from a word in Greek which means 'deceit', 'deception', 'delusion', 'fraud'. These are all incredibly strong words, and they show that homosexuality is not an unfortunate 'disposition' with which some people have been born. Homosexual conduct is a deliberate choice. Like all sin, it flows out of our fallenness and comes from a totally mistaken view of life. As such is it culpable—it is reprehensible.

More than that, the Bible makes it clear that homosexuality goes against God's creative purpose for us as male and female human beings and, as such, brings his anger down upon our heads. He has designed us for heterosexual marriage, and that's that!

Does this mean it is wrong for a person to have feelings towards someone of the same gender? Is it inappropriate for a man to have an affection for a man, or a woman to love another woman? Surely not. But like all relationships in life, there must be discipline. That affection must not be allowed to get out of hand. There must be no inappropriate *sexual* element in that love.

In the Old Testament, David's closest friend and ally was King Saul's son, Jonathan. They loved each other with a deep intensity but which was devoid of any homosexual element:

When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own

soul . . . Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul (1 Sam. 18:1, 3).

Following news of Jonathan's death, David spoke of their mutual love:

I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women (2 Sam. 1:26).

Christians are not immune from having so-called 'unwanted' homosexual feelings. That's why self-discipline is so important in the face of all the pressures which our culture brings on us to conform to its standards. More than ever we must see the biblical principles that apply to this subject, and order our relationships so that they honour God and his word. It will mean avoiding all 'appearances' of evil. It will mean staying clear of all forms of wrong sexual associations.

This means that all of us need wisdom and resolve in order to maintain an integrity in these relationships with others to whom we feel some special attraction. Remember that *our* resolve may be what is vital in keeping *them* from sin. God forbid that our lack of discipline and obedience should be the cause of someone else's spiritual and moral downfall.

If we have already been involved in sexual and relational failure, then our only recourse is to come back to the Cross. God's great grace comes to us in and through Christ, and by faith we may know his forgiveness of our past. Only the Cross brings release from guilt. It is Christ who can cleanse our memories and renew us to a right relationship with the Father and thus to others.

God's Ultimate Intention

I began in the early chapters by talking about self-discipline in the life of a Christian and the primary goal of godliness. I have talked about holiness of life as central to all that we ought to be as believers. We need now to come back to that subject as we draw together the threads of the many themes we've discussed. We must ask ourselves, 'What is God's ultimate intention? Where is all this heading? What is to be the end chapter?' As a starter, consider the following quotation from Isaiah:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.' The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!' Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs.

The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out' (Isa. 6:1-7).

Isaiah had been set apart for the Lord—not just as a prophet—but as a member of the people of God. When he came into the temple he received this vision of God's holiness, 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory'. But then he suddenly saw his own evil and impurity. He was overcome by the sight—for, by comparison, he was unclean and therefore undone. 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!' How could he see the holiness of the Living God and still remain alive?

If that was all the prophet had seen and experienced, then he could have been driven to despair. But one of the seraphs took a live coal from the altar of sacrifice and touched his mouth and uttered the wonderful words of assurance: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out'. In that instant he knew he had been cleansed entirely and so constituted holy indeed in God's eyes.

The glory of God's holiness had now enveloped the prophet and he was transformed into a new man. That's when he heard the voice of the Lord calling: 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?'—to which he replied, 'Here am I; send me!' (Isa. 6:8). Thus it is holiness that fits us for service, and it is holiness that fits us for heaven.

A similar event took place in the life of Simon Peter, the professional fisherman. He had met Jesus of Nazareth and had listened to his teaching. But Peter still did not really know who this man was and he certainly had little understanding of his own sinfulness or his need for God's

cleansing. After teaching the crowd by the lakeside, Jesus instructed Simon to push his boat out into the deeper water and there to let down his nets for a catch. ‘Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets’ (Luke 5:5). Simon Peter reluctantly obeyed, but immediately hauled in a huge net-full of fish—so much so that he and his friends struggled to bring their catch to land. When Peter saw what had happened, the penny dropped (as they say)—he suddenly realised who this Jesus really was. He no longer addressed him as ‘Boss’ but as ‘Lord’! At the same time Peter saw himself: ‘. . . he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”’ The holiness of Jesus had confronted Peter and he saw his own impurity. But Christ’s simple words, ‘Do not be afraid’ (Luke 5:10), were all the assurance Peter needed. He dropped everything and followed Jesus to learn how to become a true disciple and a ‘fisherman’ of men and women.

The holiness of God is at the heart of my call in this book to self-discipline in the life of the Christian. We need to see things in perspective. We urgently need to recapture a passion for personal holiness in the light of God’s holiness and his ultimate intention for us. God’s goal for us is ‘glory’. It is his aim to bring us back into that glory which we lost in the Fall. He is going to bring us back to Eden! Right now, we are being changed from one degree of glory to another, and we know that when we finally see Christ face to face, we will be like him! We will be back in his image. But that image is a holy image. When we are finally ‘unveiled’ we will be holy like Christ. That’s where we are heading:

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure (1 John 3:1–3).

John clearly shows that this hope of our glorification with Christ dictates our motives and conduct now. Those who have this hope ‘purify themselves, just as he is pure’. It is an empty profession to say we believe we are headed for glory and yet do very little to be fitting ourselves for that destiny right now. I keep saying, holiness is not an optional extra. *We must be holy men and women.* And we must see the urgency of that need!

Let me put to you this urgency for holiness from another angle. In the Book of Revelation, the readers are constantly being told to endure to the end, and so the call goes out for us to be conquerors!

If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels (Rev. 3:5).

If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God (Rev. 3:12).

The picture comes across that it is those who ‘endure to the end’ who will be saved. It is those who ‘conquer’ who will finally make it. Does that mean everything depends on us? Is our final salvation conditional on us after all? Does it mean that if we fail to ‘endure’ then we are lost forever? Surely not. But these words do tell us that heaven is not easily attained. It is no trifling matter to be among those who enter glory. We dare not take lightly the need to be

holy and to be among those who are persevering in faith day in, day out. That's why I have talked so much in this book about the practical day-to-day disciplines which ought to have priority in our living: prayer, reading the word of God, worship, good habit patterns, the right use of our money and so on. All these are part and parcel of living a holy life that is ultimately fitting us for heaven.

Of course, in all this we must keep seeing that—from first to last—our salvation is always the sovereign work of God himself. No man, woman, boy or girl will ever come into his presence because they have earned that privilege. No one will be there because they attained some lofty height of piety or holiness in and of themselves. No one will be in heaven who has won the battle over sin and evil out of their own resources. No, never. It is all of God's grace. But as we have seen many times throughout these chapters, our good Lord has determined that we are to be partners in cooperating with him in what he is doing. However, if we are to be conquerors, then it is only ever because Jesus himself has conquered on our behalf. We endure 'in him'. We conquer 'in him'. We are saved in the end only because we are 'in him'. Nevertheless, our enduring and our conquering still flow out of our determination to be obedient and to be holy. Objectively, we are declared to be holy because of Christ—that's a fact. Subjectively, we are holy only because we have deliberately set out to be holy—here and now—in obedience to God's command:

Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14).

Every day we experience the pressures of the immediate. We are immersed in the immediate events and circumstances of life—with all that that means in our day-to-day

affairs and interactions with others. We are constantly being assaulted by the world, the flesh and the devil. As much as we would like it to be otherwise, the going is often very tough indeed. Being a consistent, disciplined Christian in a hostile world is no bed of roses. Though we have been set apart as holy in Christ (into which blessing we enter at the moment of our conversion), seeking to live consistent with that calling in daily holiness and righteousness is another matter altogether. P. T. Forsyth wrote:

To make us partakers of God's holiness: there are no cheap absolutions. Hold out. Do not spoil God's sculpture. Lend yourself like living marble, 'living stones'. Do not be stubborn to the potter, as intractable clay. God is not making casts but men. Forward the Maker's work. Rise to it, as the audience rises to the speaker who is moulding them. Yield yourselves servants of righteousness. You were hearty enough as servants to unrighteousness. If you cease to be martyrs, you cease to be sons.¹

For some, this holy living means deep suffering. Such suffering is not the price of glory, but the *way* to glory! Paul tells us in Romans 5:3–5 that we can exult in suffering because we know what it is for and that to which it is leading. But we will often want to give up. Thus the Bible provides us with many encouragements so that we will press on. It tells us to persevere. It tells us not to quit in the face of difficulties. It tells us to endure to the end. It tells us to keep looking ahead:

Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart . . . So we do not lose heart.

¹ P. T. Forsyth, *Revelation: Old and New*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2001, p. 90.

Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal (2 Cor. 4:1, 16–18).

We know that Paul had a disciplined mind and was self-controlled in every aspect of his faith. He saw things as they really are. That same faith-perspective is needed if we too are to keep the ‘immediate’ and the ‘future’ in their correct relationship. We will find it hard to persevere, hard to keep at it, hard to keep going, if we do not have a disciplined perspective of faith. Without it, we run the risk of being discouraged, of losing heart and giving up.

It seems to me that, in every aspect of our walk as Christians, discipline and faith go hand in hand. How can a person have faith and yet be undisciplined?—it is mere wishful-thinking Christianity. And how can a person be disciplined but not have faith?—that is hopeless asceticism. Growth and maturity in the Christian life come in the context of a disciplined building on the foundation of Christ—a building with gold, silver and precious stones, and *not* wood, hay and straw (see 1 Cor. 3:12). The undisciplined Christian will have little to show for his or her life at the end. By contrast, the disciplined believer will have an abundant entrance into the Kingdom with its promised rewards. In this respect we would do well to reflect upon such passages as Hebrews 3:12–19; 4:11; 5:11–14; John 8:31; and 1 Corinthians 10:1–13.

We must never lose sight of the fact that glorification is the ultimate goal. In a very true sense we are glorified now, but though we have not yet ‘arrived’ we are headed for it without a doubt!

And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified (Rom. 8:30).

We must therefore guard against being discouraged by the pressures and trials of the immediate. Take up your responsibilities as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. Be strong in him. Discipline yourself for godliness knowing that the promises of God are absolutely certain. Do all in the light of grace, and *in* grace. Maintain that certain assurance that you are accepted in the Beloved. You are righteous in his sight. You are one of his children *now*:

Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:58).

J. C. Ryle paints a simple picture of the pleasure and rest that are to be ours in the heaven:

The road through Glencroe carries the traveller up a long and steep ascent, with many a little turn and winding in its course. But when the top of the pass is reached, a stone is seen by the wayside with these simple words inscribed upon it:—‘Rest, and be thankful.’ Those words describe the feelings with which every thirsting one who comes to Christ will enter heaven. The summit of the narrow way will at length be ours. We shall cease from our weary journeyings, and sit down in the kingdom of God. We shall look back on all the way of our lives with thankfulness, and see the perfect wisdom of every step in the steep ascent by which we were led. We shall forget the toil of the upward journey in the glorious rest. Here, in this world, our sense of rest in Christ at best is feeble and partial: we hardly seem at times to taste fully ‘the living water.’ But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is imperfect shall be done away. ‘When we awake up after His likeness we shall be satisfied.’ (Psalm

xvii. 15.) We shall drink of the river of His pleasures and thirst no more.²

I have said that God's ultimate intention is that we will be brought back to Eden and that we will be glorified. But even all this is for a higher purpose—it is so that the Father will have a holy bride for his Son. I know it is impossible for us to take in all that this means, but God has redeemed us so that we will be united to Christ as his beloved. We may understand the union in marriage between a man and a woman in which the two become one in God's eyes, but the Bible tells us that this is a type of the ultimate union that is between Christ and his church—between Christ and his bride. On that great day of the marriage of the Son of God—the Lamb—we will be fully one with him. We will have been brought back into a full and rich union with God himself, in Christ. That which God always intended for us as a race will finally come to fruition—our total communion and union with the Divine. All human history has been heading towards this grand end. That's why our human history is really salvation history—God's story of his doings that are leading to this ultimate goal.

I know that for some Christians this seems so mystical and unreal that it is hard to take in. But for each of us, the tide of faith needs to rise to embrace what the Scriptures are really saying. We must have an eternal perspective of all that is happening (and is yet to happen) so that this will govern our present conduct and priorities.

When God the Father drew us to faith in Christ through the powerful internal workings of his Spirit, it was with the view to us becoming the bride for his Son. Paul understood this mystery and spoke about the yearning he had

for his converts to be obedient, disciplined and holy—fit for their glorious destiny:

I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ (2 Cor. 11:2).

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish (Eph. 5:25–27).

Believers truly are the 'Bride of Christ' and we ought to be making ourselves ready for that grand day when our union with him will be consummated. John saw this in his vision of the risen, triumphant Lamb and he wrote about it in Revelation:

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out, 'Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure'—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, 'Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb'. And he said to me, 'These are true words of God' (Rev. 19:6–9).

My call for us to be self-disciplined and self-controlled is not just 'a good idea' that will lead us into a better, more productive lifestyle here and now. It is far more than that. I want you to step back and see the big canvas! I want you to expand your horizon! I want you to see the vast panorama

² Ryle, *Holiness*, p. 276.

of God's great plan for human history in which he has graciously given us a part. See what he is doing and where all this is heading! See the imperative that should be urging us on—preparing ourselves for what he has in store. Break out of the mould of the immediate and the short-term and see the BIG PICTURE!

I urge you—as I keep urging myself—to stop mucking around with the trivia of life. Quit being caught up with this world's focus on entertainment, amusement, the material and short-term goals. Time is running out. Get rid of those impediments that hold you back and blind you to the eternal realities. Throw off those bad habits and slack ways which dog your steps and prevent you from being in 'top gear' for the Lord. Keep fresh in your mind all that the Lord has graciously done for you in his death and resurrection and reigning power. Live each day in the good of his incredible forgiveness and love. Be on fire for him. Be aglow with the Spirit. Fan the flame of his love in your heart so you'll have an ongoing passion for holiness and likeness to Jesus. Be alert against all sin and temptation and the wiles of the devil. Be strong in the Lord and in his might. Put on his armour and fight the good fight of faith. Be out there in the world sharing the great message of grace with those who don't yet know. Be living epistles in this lost and fallen world. Seek to represent Christ every moment of every day.

As I have said before, you and I must go on realising that what we are now is intimately related to the role that God has purposed for each one of us in his new heaven and new earth. We must constantly keep in the front of our minds that we are to be consistent with who we are going to be when Christ comes again for his bride. Therefore, I say to you: REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE! You are a son, a

daughter, of the King. *So be what you are!* Live each day in the good of who he has made you to be and of what you will be in his soon-coming, glorious Kingdom.

To that end, go on being disciplined each day for his honour and glory!