Training to Be Godly

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Every July, our family watches Wimbledon, where the best tennis pros battle it out in front of the centre court faithful. The players make it look so easy – the thunderbolt serve, the reflex volley, the dancing feet movement and anticipation for the next shot. The mental strength and fitness required to be a top player requires years of dedication and practice. One does not wake up one morning and decide to be world-class. Similarly, this is true for us when growing in godliness.

Godly Training takes Devotion

Did you know that to become a man or woman of God takes **training and devotion?** It does not happen by accident; we do not drift into godliness. We see this principle in the Scriptures which says, "… *train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way*" (1 Timothy 4:7b-8, ESV).

The Apostle Paul wrote this to Timothy, but the principles are for us all. Instead of a select few, a 'spiritual elite', the Lord's intent is for us all to become men and women of God. So, from this Scripture, here are three principles for us to consider.

1. The Aim for Us is Godliness

"*Train yourself* ***for godliness***", we read. Becoming godly is then the goal of spiritual training. But what is godliness? Being godly speaks of having real character or qualities that reflect Jesus in how we act and think. The Greek word for *godliness* refers to a Jesus-follower who 'walks the talk' in daily life, undergirded by knowing God (2 Peter 1:3) and His truth (Titus 1:1).

Aiming for godliness doesn't mean we should all be in 'full-time ministry' or church planters in a foreign land. While the call of God might precipitate that (and we need more of these workers!), we must live out holy lives amid the station we find ourselves in. David Pawson once said, "It is better to be a godly taxi driver than an ungodly missionary." Therefore we can pursue godliness (1 Timothy 6:11) since it involves growing in character and ability, rather than status or position.

2. We Train to Be Godly

In 1 Timothy 4, Paul alludes to something to which those in the Roman empire could relate: sports and physical training. Interestingly, the sports centre or gymnasium "was the centre of civic life in Hellenized towns" [1], and the Romans idolised strong and disciplined athletes. The verb in verse 7, '*train*' (*gumnazō* in Greek), can mean "working out in the gymnasium." [2]

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The very concept of training implies a disciplined process rather than a quick fix. Dallas Willard writes on this point: "We are somewhat misled by the reports of experiences by many great spiritual leaders, and we assign their greatness to these great moments they were given, neglecting the years of slow progress they endured before them." [3]

I've seen this to be true! We often think great leaders 'glow in the dark and sleep with the angels, ' as William Marais says, but we forget what makes them great leaders is the ability to remain obedient and faithful even when it feels mundane. Don't minimise and discount the consistent and unspectacular practice of loving God when no one sees.

What Does Training for Godliness Look Like?

Fundamentally, it involves practising spiritual disciplines, just as an athlete practices physical disciplines. Spiritual disciplines include cultivating habits like **daily prayer times** and **reading the Scriptures**. Fasting, witnessing, sacrificial giving, Bible study, and devotion to fellowship are examples of other disciplines. If we are serious about becoming a man or woman of God, we will be exercising, so to speak, to grow in godly habits. Then, as we practice them step by step and little by little, often imperfectly, we find ourselves training for godliness. And, over time, we will look back and see the character of Jesus being formed in our lives.

3. We Take Ownership of Becoming Godly

"*Train **yourself***," Paul tells us. While we can have spiritual mentors and friends, ultimately only you can determine your character development. I have seen too many Christians point the finger at outward circumstances, church leaders and the devil for their lack of growth in God. In the end, the only one who can stop you from becoming a godly person is you! This is because the most challenging person you will ever lead is yourself. We don't always do what we tell ourselves to do. Instead, we rebel and argue and resist our desire to grow in God.

So How Do We Lead Ourselves?

Firstly, we start by continually turning to and leaning on Jesus and His precious Spirit. As we acknowledge our inability to pursue godliness, He empowers and enables us to overcome ourselves (2 Corinthians 2:16 and 3:5-6).

Secondly, we have to resolve to speak truth to ourselves instead of listening to the inner-critic and doubter within. David, in the Psalms, is an example of this type of self-leadership. He reminded his soul of what was true (Psalms 42:5) when his emotions and circumstances clouded his faith in God.

Thirdly, intentionally ask godly leaders in your local church to hold you accountable and to speak

the truth in love to you. While we take ownership of ourselves, we are still part of a body where our 'training' happens in the midst of sharing life together.

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A Resolve

Remember, we don't train for godliness to be loved by God, but rather because we already are loved by God. Our Father is enthusiastic about us in Christ! From this place (loved and accepted by God through our faith in Jesus), we burn to grow into the kind of people we already are – the people of Christ.

In closing, we know that a world-class athlete or tennis player has to suffer to succeed. They do so for earthly reward, but we do so for eternal gain! God promises that "G*odliness is of value **in every way**, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come*" (1 Timothy 4:8, ESV). Let us resolve to commit ourselves afresh to the lifelong habit of training ourselves to be men and women of God, to be the Bride that Jesus longs for. May we not become burnt-out statistics – those eager souls who started well but became distracted or disillusioned in the faith. Oh God, help us!

REFERENCES

[1] Keener, Craig (2014). The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament (Second Edition). IVP Academic

[2] Belleville, L. (2009). _Commentary on 1 Timothy. In Cornerstone Biblical Commentary. Tyndale House Publishers.

[3] Willard, Dallas. (2011). The Spirit of the Disciplines. HarperCollins