

Brick by Brick, Part 3

Scripture: Romans 12:13

Code: 45-95

INTRODUCTION

Lenin, the Russian Communist leader, once said, "With a handful of dedicated people who will give me their lives, I will control the world. " He set out to accomplish that goal and it's still in the process of being accomplished. He was saying, in effect, that the world belongs to the disciplined--the dedicated people who give up their lives for a cause they believe in. That's really true.

A. Self-Discipline in Contemporary Culture

1. The Emphasis

Contemporary American culture and much of the rest of the world is losing sight of the need for self-discipline. Our society now features relaxation and recreation. We say we are under such great stress from living at such a fast pace that many of us are winding up in mental hospitals, taking drugs, and committing suicide. But that is really the frantic activity of the undisciplined. A properly disciplined life is not out of control. Very often an undisciplined style of living is a result of a passionate effort toward self-improvement, self- fulfillment that is measured by material things. There's a furious effort to have a good time out of life while discipline goes by the wayside because our society loves to play. Sports have gone beyond any reasonable proportion. When play exceeds a balanced place, it marks a decadent society. That is not mere philosophizing; it is a fact of history! A large amount of personal discipline is required to produce great thinkers, writers, artists, musicians, theologians, technicians, doctors, attorneys, and leaders. It takes no discipline to watch a ball game, or to play tennis or golf the way most people play. There's little mental discipline involved in those things when enjoyed as forms of relaxation.

Author Richard Shelley Taylor has made some interesting points on the subject of discipline. He says: "There was a time when intercollegiate debating drew big crowds. Now the debates are held in side rooms, while the crowd cheers at the basketball game. This shift of interest from the intellectual to the recreational has occurred even in Christian colleges--so widespread is the accent on relaxation and recreation. It must be emphatically asserted that the shift of excited popular interest from debates to basketball is a sign of cultural decline" (The Disciplined Life [Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1962], p. 18). That shift is the mark of superficiality and overindulgence. Recreation and relaxation can never return to society any value commensurate with all the energy put into them. They do not have that capability, "for bodily exercise profiteth little . . . " (1 Tim. 4:8). The discipline of the mind and spirit is on a far higher level.

2. The Effects

a. Overcoming the Obstacles

Disciplined character belongs to the person who achieves a balance in his life by bringing all his mental faculties, emotions, and abilities under control. Taylor says that a disciplined person "rises courageously, even heroically, to meet life and conquer it. He resolutely faces his duty. He is governed by a sense of responsibility. He has inward resources and personal reserves which are the wonder of weaker souls. He brings adversity under tribute, and compels it to serve him. . . . The strong character of Madame Guyon enabled her, though imprisoned, to rise in spirit and sing: 'My cage confines me round; Abroad I cannot fly. But though my wing is closely bound, My heart's at liberty. My prison walls cannot control the flight, the freedom of the soul.' Of course there is power in such a life!" (pp. 22-23). That kind of life is disciplined and strong in character.

b. Paying the Price

It is only disciplined character that can carry through in positions of great responsibility--whether in industry, education, business, or the church. There are many people who have great ambitions for success in all those fields, but they will never realize them because they do not know the meaning of discipline. It has little to do with their mental inabilities; it has to do with their lack of discipline. The deficiency is not in their lack of giftedness, but their lack of character: They lack the capacity to put their nose to the grindstone and stick with the task at hand.

Christopher Parkening, one of the leading classical guitarists in the world, and I have talked together about the matter of discipline. By the time he reached thirty, he was a master of his instrument. But success didn't come easily. He told me that during his youth, he wanted to participate in sports and other fun things. But he had to practice the guitar at least five hours a day. That's a tough commitment when you're an adolescent. I'm thankful that he was willing to pay that price because he is now at such a high level of proficiency that can glorify God with his instrument like few others on the face of the earth. The sweet taste of accomplishment will be his the rest of his life. In contrast, there are many musicians who just float along on their natural talent. However, there are few great artists. I wonder how many being produced in our generation.

B. Self-Discipline in the Christian Church

1. The General Context

I have seen many young men in the ministry struggle to maintain a disciplined mind and stick with the task at hand. In the battle for truth and the preservation of society, the victory belongs to the disciplined mind. Such a mind has the advantage of being able to evaluate, analyze, plan, and make decisions, while concentrating on the objective. In Christian circles, the loss of a disciplined mind is signaled by a willingness to accept everything unquestioned. Some Christians are even concerned that there be a recreational approach to Christian living. Such an emphasis is unfortunate because it will eventually result in a generation of people without disciplined minds. They will be limited in their ability to evaluate and understand truth. Furthermore, because a person with a disciplined mind is more likely to express himself clearly and persuasively with logic and reasoning, when evangelical minds become undisciplined, they lose the persuasive power of their message. It is important to have a sense of urgency about discipline. That's necessary among Christians because there are so many of them who lack it. If the church allows an undisciplined approach to Christian living, it's going to produce an undisciplined generation of Christians, which will bring about mediocrity in the church's message and effectiveness.

a. Self-Discipline Explained

What is self-discipline? I think the best definition is, "the ability to regulate your conduct by principle and sound judgment, rather than by impulse, desire, high pressure, or social custom." Most people,

however, regulate their behavior by the latter alternatives. But that's not discipline, which is the ability to subordinate the body and emotions to what is right and best. Not everyone is willing to do that. Most people don't know how to control themselves. They do whatever they feel like doing without concern for the consequences. They do whatever society dictates for them. They're like dead fish floating down stream--they don't know what it is like to fight the current.

Now for the Christian, we can define self-discipline very simply: It is obeying the Word of God. It means bringing my desires and emotions under the control of God so that I live an obedient life that has the glory of God as its primary goal. That is a self-disciplined spiritual life. I struggle with self-discipline like you do, but I thank the Lord that at one point in my life, I made a commitment to be a disciplined person. That has been the basis of my ministry through the years. It is not that I am especially intelligent. It is simply that God graciously prompted my heart so that I made a choice to cultivate a disciplined life. The most blessed choice I ever made, apart from choosing Christ, was to try to subordinate all things to the Word of God to determine what is right and best.

b. Self-Discipline Encouraged

Realizing that adults need discipline imposed on them, it is easy to see why you must work so hard with your children. It is vital that you teach your children to be self-disciplined. Teach them to subjugate their desires to what is right. Don't let them get away with doing wrong and throwing tantrums. Rather, confine them to a self-disciplined pattern with love. If you don't, you'll raise a potential criminal. He may not get caught, but he'll be anti-social. Scripture tells us that we are to teach our children proper principles. We are to reinforce those principles with punishment so that when our children act in an undisciplined manner, they pay a price. There are no disciplined children who didn't pay a price. They learn discipline because the consequences of an undisciplined life are too severe. If they do wrong and get spanked enough times, they're going to stop what they've been doing. Adults also need to be self-disciplined. We need to put ourselves in a position of accountability to rules and laws. It's absurd to think that you can live any way you want because you're a Christian. No. We need rules enforced by an outside authority that imposes consequences for violating them. When we violate the Word of God, the Lord will chasten us so that the consequences of misbehavior are severe enough to motivate us to do what is right. God wants to cultivate a self-disciplined life in us.

2. The Specific Context

Romans 12:9-21 contains laws that have been given by God. They are indicators of a disciplined life--they can determine whether you have a self-disciplined life in the spiritual dimension. It is human to be hypocritical, evil, possessive, self-centered, unkind, lazy, indifferent to the needs of others, and angry at people who are mean to you. It is human to show favoritism to those you like better than others, to seek revenge on those who have wronged you, and to delight in your enemy's misfortune. Those things may be natural, but all of them are wrong.

A Christian needs to cultivate a self-disciplined life so that he no longer does what is natural, but what is right and good by God's standard. As he eliminates hypocrisy from his life, he fills his life with genuine love. He eliminates evil and practices that which is good. Instead of being selfish, he is unselfish, humble, and kind to other people. Instead of being lazy, he is diligent. Instead of being possessive, self-centered, and self-indulgent, he gives what he has to other people. Instead of hating those who hurt him, he loves and blesses them. Instead of showing favoritism, he treats all the same.

A disciplined person brings his natural desires under control, subjugating them to the principles of Scripture. The process is outlined for us in Romans 12. It begins in verses 1 and 2 where you present yourself--your body, soul, mind, and will--as a living sacrifice to God. As a result, your mind

is transformed so that you no longer do what the world does. You perform God's will, subjecting your own will, emotions, and desires, to the authority of God's Word. Christians who live out the principles of Romans 12 have learned by God's grace to be self-disciplined.

How do I become self-disciplined?

Let me give you some practical advice:

1. Start Small - For example, start with your room. Clean it and keep it that way. When something is out of order, learn to put it in order. Pick things up and put them away. Then extend that discipline of neatness to the rest of your home.
2. Be on Time - That may not sound very spiritual, but it's important. If you're supposed to be somewhere at a certain time, make sure you are there when expected. Cultivate the ability to sublimate your desires, activities, and demands so that you can arrive on time.
3. Do the Hardest Job First - Doing that will prevent the hardest jobs from being left undone.
4. Organize Your Life - Plan; don't just react to circumstances. Use a calendar and make a daily list of things you need to accomplish. If you don't control your time, everything else will.
5. Be Grateful for Correction - Correction helps make you more disciplined because it shows you what you need to avoid. Don't shun criticism; accept it gladly.
6. Practice Self-Denial - Practice it in a simple way: If you want a big hot fudge sundae, order an iced tea instead. You say, "But I'm thin. " It doesn't matter; the issue is cultivating self-restraint. Learn to say no to your feelings. I've tried to train myself in that regard. When I wanted a doughnut, I would decline. Now I'm in control when it comes to things like that. I could have a doughnut and it wouldn't be the end of me. Exercising self-restraint helped me to learn how to bring many things under control. Cultivating discipline in the physical realm will spill over into the spiritual dimension.
7. Welcome Responsibility - When you have an opportunity to do something that needs to be done, volunteer for it. Welcoming responsibility forces you to organize yourself.

Those are little things that begin to cultivate self-discipline in your life .

REVIEW

Romans 12:9-21 contains principles for Christian living that are organized in ever-widening circles. Each new circle of responsibility encompasses the previous ones as well. The first phase of

responsibility has to do with personal duties, the second with other Christians, the third with everyone in general, and the fourth with enemies who have wronged you.

I. DUTIES TOWARD OURSELVES (v. 9)

Loving without hypocrisy, hating what is evil, and clinging to what is good are the bottom-line principles of a disciplined life.

II. DUTIES TOWARD OTHER CHRISTIANS (vv. 10-13)

A. Loving the Brothers (v. 10)

We are to love other Christians with a familial love that is willing to meet their needs. We are to love them with humility, being quicker to honor them than ourselves.

B. Serving the Lord (vv. 11-13)

1. The Modifiers (v. 11a-b)

a. Zealous in Service (v. 11a)

b. Fervent in Spirit (v. 11b)

1) Explained (see p. xx)

2) Exemplified

a) Apollos

b) Henry Martyn

c) Paul the Apostle

d) C. T. Studd

Studd possessed much of the world's goods, but gave it all away and became a missionary. He wrote, "Some want to live within the sound of church or chapel bell; I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell. " I like that spirit!

e) John Wesley

This man of zeal said, "Give me a hundred men who love God with all their hearts, and fear nothing but sin, and I will move the world. "

f) Jim Elliot

One day Elliot, a martyr of Ecuador, read Hebrews 1:7, which says that God makes "His ministers a flame of fire. " That caused him to write these words in his diary: "Am I ignitable? God, deliver me from the dread asbestos of other things. Saturate me with the oil of the Spirit that I may be a flame. But flame is transient, often short-lived. Canst thou bear this, my soul--short life? In me there dwells the Spirit of the great Short-Lived Whose zeal for God's house consumed Him. Make me Thy fuel, Flame of God. " That last line came from a poem written by Amy Carmichael. Its last stanza reads:

Give me the love that leads the way,

The faith that nothing can dismay,

The hope no disappointments tire,

The passion that will burn like fire,

Let me not sink to be a clod:

Make me Thy fuel, Flame of God.

Elliot wanted to be an intense flame for God, even if it meant lasting only a short while. He chose to

identify himself with another whose ministry was very brief--our Lord Jesus Christ.

g) Bishop Ryle

Every Christian, I suppose, would like to be like the man nineteenth-century English Bishop J. C. Ryle describes: "A zealous man in religion is pre-eminently a man of one thing. It is not enough to say that he is earnest, hearty, uncompromising, thorough-going, whole-hearted, fervent in spirit. He sees only one thing, he cares for one thing, he lives for one thing, he is swallowed up in one thing; and that one thing is to please God. Whether he lives, or whether he dies,-- whether he has health, or whether he has sickness,-- whether he is rich, or whether he is poor,--whether he pleases man, or whether he gives offense,--whether he is thought wise, or whether he is thought foolish,-- whether he gets blame, or whether he gets praise,-- whether he gets honour, or whether he gets shame,--for all this the zealous man cares nothing at all. He burns for one thing; and that one thing is to please God, and to advance God's glory. If he is consumed in the very burning, he cares not for it,--he is content. He feels that, like a lamp, he is made to burn; and if consumed in burning, he has but done the work for which God appointed him. Such an one will always find a sphere for his zeal. If he cannot preach, and work, and give money, he will cry, and sigh, and pray" (Practical Religion, [London: James Clarke & Co. , Ltd. , 1959], p. 130). That's a man who's fervent in spirit, serving the Lord with a disciplined life!

The Fool with One Thought

The Apostle Paul has always been my model of a disciplined life. If there was a divine principle to follow, he lived by it. He was also a man of one desire--pleasing God. Someone has tried to capture the fervency of Paul in a unique sketch:

"He is a man without the care of making friends, without the hope or desire of worldly good, without the apprehension of worldly loss, without the care of life, without the fear of death. He is a man of no rank, country or condition. A man of one thought--the Gospel of Christ. A man of one purpose--the glory of God. A fool, and content to reckoned a fool for Christ. Let him be called enthusiast, fanatic, babbler, or any other outlandish nondescript the world may choose to denominate him. But still let him be nondescript. As soon as they call him trader, householder, citizen, man of wealth, man of the world, man of learning, or even man of common sense, it is all over with his character. He must speak or he must die, and though he should die, he will speak. He has no rest, but hastens over land and sea, over rocks and trackless deserts. He cries aloud and spares not, and will not be hindered. In the prisons, he lifts up his voice, and in the tempests of the ocean, he is not silent. Before awful councils and throned kings, he witnesses in behalf of the truth. Nothing can quench his voice but death, and even in the article of death, before the knife has severed his head from his body, he speaks, he prays, he testifies, he confesses. "

That's quite a testimony, isn't it? If you called Paul an enthusiast, fanatic, babbler, or any other general title, that wouldn't bother him. But if you tried to classify him as a citizen, a man of wealth, a man of the world, or a man of learning, he would have been disturbed because he didn't want to be identified as such. Rather, he wanted to be known as a man of one thing--a fervent commitment to the gospel of Christ.

3. The Motivators (v. 12)

Living a fervent life as indicated in verse 11 is not easy because there will be all kinds of difficulties. If you love without hypocrisy, hate evil, hold to what is good, help and honor others, and fervently serve the Lord, then you're going to face some trials. Verse 12 tells us that hope, patience, and prayer aid the person in difficulty. The elements of a self-disciplined life allow us to endure trials, knowing that a glorious day is coming when we're going to see the Lord Jesus Christ and all our struggles will end.

I don't mind paying the price of being disciplined now because I know there's going to be a day when sinning and suffering will be over and I'll rest forever in the glories of perfection with my Savior. I rejoice in that hope, but I get weary sometimes. There's a tolerance level that all of us have and I seem to be on the edge of it most of the time. Some people have asked me, "Why do you keep taking on more projects? Why don't you just back away from being so involved?" There's nothing I will not attempt to do if God has put it in my heart. Others have asked me, "Aren't you looking forward to retirement?" But I'll never retire. What would I retire from--the gospel? You may dump me as your pastor long before I'm ready to go, but my ministry as a pastor and teacher is a lifelong commitment, as long as I have my senses. The discipline I need for my earthly life seems small when compared with the hope for eternity.

God would have us all subject our desires, emotions, and wills to divine priorities. The flow of verses 9-12 is clear: A Christian should love with a pure love, hate evil, stick to what is good, be tenderly affectionate to other believers, humbly seek to honor others than be honored himself, and be enthusiastic, whole-hearted, zealous, obedient, and diligent in his service to Christ. We will conquer trials that come by our strong hope in God's promise of future glory. That allows the believer to patiently endure everything he faces as he constantly commits himself to the Lord's will and loving care.

Paul concludes the circle of responsibility related to the family of Christ in verse 13. Leaving our review, let us examine:

4. The Mandate (v. 13)

"Distributing to the [needs] of the saints; given to hospitality. "

a. Meeting the Needs of the Saints (v. 13a)

1) Explained

The world is bent on getting, but Christians are committed to giving. The flow of our life is not in, but out. The Greek word for distributing comes from *koinonia*, which means "communion, sharing, partnership, fellowship. " It indicates that I'm a partner with other saints, and that if they have a need, I should share my resources with them. I don't own anything in the final analysis. What I have, I manage for the Lord. Where there are people with needs, my resources are equally theirs because we share as partners. It is a Christian duty for us to do that.

2) Exemplified

a) Acts 2 and 4--The early church sold their individual possessions when others had needs, taking the money gained from the sale and giving it them.

b) Hebrews 13:16--"But to do good and to share forget not; for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. " God is pleased when I take the resources I have and give them to someone who needs

them.

c) 1 Timothy 6:17-18--"Charge them that are rich in this age . . . that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to share. " Those who "are rich in this age" would certainly include most Christians in America. We have so much more than most of the world. As part of our Christian duty, we should look upon others as our partners so that we can be willing to share our riches as they have need.

Whom should I give money to?

The answer is very simple. Jesus answered the question, "Who is my neighbor?" with the story about a man lying on a road on the way to Jericho after having been beaten and robbed (Lk. 10:30-37). The point of the story is that your "neighbor" is whoever is lying in your path with a need. He wasn't saying pack up all your money in an envelop and send it overseas so that someone there can pass it out; rather, hold on to what you have so that when God puts somebody in your path with a need, you can meet it.

A pastor once asked me what I thought about meeting the financial needs of the saints. I told him that I don't believe in merely writing out a check every once in a while to a relief organization, although there's a place for that. All of us are concerned about areas of the world undergoing famine. Grace Church is concerned about those kinds of projects, but distributing to the needs of the saints involves specifically meeting the needs of believers. So when someone in your path has a need, meet it if you can. I have received calls from people who have mentioned a need that someone else has, and have asked if the church could give them some money. My answer usually is, "Do you think maybe the Lord brought that need in front of you so that you might meet it? You are part of the church. If you tell us someone has a need but aren't willing or able to meet it, we're going to have to find someone else who is. " I think we need to learn that part of Christian living is meeting the needs of our partners in Christ. No matter how much I understand that, I always feel like I never do what I should. I often feel guilty for failing to be sensitive to needs I could have met. It is important to cultivate that sensitivity by considering believers as your partners.

At the end of verse 13, the Apostle Paul says that Christians should also be committed to . . .

b. Meeting the Needs of Strangers (v. 13b)

". . . given to hospitality. "

1) Explained

That is a strong statement encouraging Christians to love strangers. Hospitality is not to be done reluctantly, saying, "Oh brother, we've got someone else coming over! Do we have to share our food with them? We can't keep this up!" We are to pursue hospitality, which is an expression of love towards strangers.

In Paul's day, if you didn't stay in someone's home, you had to stay at inns, which were not usually safe places. There was a great need for lodging as persecution forced Christians to relocate. Furthermore, Christians opened their homes for traveling preachers since that was the best place for them to stay.

2) Expressed

The New Testament is filled with exhortations for Christians to be hospitable.

a) Titus 1:8--An elder is to be "a lover of hospitality"; not a reluctant lover of strangers, but one who eagerly loves them. He is to be willing to share what he has with them.

b) 1 Peter 4:9--"Use hospitality one to another without grudging. " The assumption is that showing hospitality isn't always going to be easy for us. Therefore Peter says to do it "without grudging. " We can do it because we don't have any choice, but we ought to be eager to minister to strangers. We ought to be generous to guests, giving them the best of what we have as we share our love with them.

c) 2 Timothy 1:16-18--Paul said, "The Lord give mercy unto the house of Onesiphorus; for he often refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain, but, when he was in Rome, he sought me out very diligently, and found me. The Lord grant unto him that he may find mercy of the Lord in that day; and in how many things he ministered unto me at Ephesus, thou knowest very well. " The house of Onesiphorus served the needs of Paul with gracious hospitality. That's one practical Christian duty.

d) Luke 14:12-14--Jesus said that when you have a feast, don't call your rich friends or family. Rather, have the handicapped and the poor over because other people get invited all the time. Invite those who don't usually get invited.

Recognize that everyone in the family of Christ is a partner with you. If they have a need, you should share with them, since, in a sense, what you own is theirs as well. Learn to cultivate a spirit of love toward those who aren't a part of your inner circle of family and friends. Reach out to them eagerly, without grudging. That is your Christian duty to others. But to be committed to these things, you've got to learn to do what God wants you to do. God, help us to live that kind of disciplined life! May we eagerly come under the standards of Scripture as we live by them with joy and gratitude!

Focusing on the Facts

1. What is contemporary American culture and much of the rest of the world losing sight of? What does our society emphasize instead?

2. What shift in interest in college activities is a sign of cultural decline, according to Richard Shelley Taylor?

3. What must a disciplined person achieve a balance in?

4. What does a person need besides great ambition to achieve success in his field?

5. What advantage does a Christian with a disciplined mind have in communicating the gospel?

6. Define self-discipline. What does it mean in Christian terms?

7. How are we to reinforce the divine principles we teach? Why?

8. What can help teach adults to discipline themselves?

9. Can a Christian live any way he wants? Explain.

10. What does God want to cultivate in every believer?
11. In the context of Romans 12:9-21, describe a self-disciplined Christian.
12. According to Bishop Ryle, what one thing does a zealous Christian live for, regardless of circumstances? Explain.
13. What did Paul want to be known as? What did he not want to be known as?
14. How should we view our resources in the context of meeting the needs of other Christians?
15. What sacrifices is God pleased with, according to Hebrews 13:16?
16. How are we supposed to express love toward strangers?
17. Why did Peter say that we should show hospitality without grudging? How should we respond to our guests?
18. Rather than inviting our rich friends and family to dinner, whom did Jesus say that we should invite (Lk. 14:12-14)? Why?

Pondering the Principles

1. How self-disciplined are you? Do you take the initiative in accomplishing things that need to be done? Or, do you wait for someone else to do them? Look at the section entitled, "How Do I Become Self-Disciplined?" on page 4. What principles there could help you to become better disciplined? Are you faithful in small things? If you're not, you probably won't be faithful in things of greater importance either. Are you on time, or are you consistently late? Can people count on you to show up when you're expected? Do you procrastinate because you fear having to face a difficult task? Do you know where you're going in life, or are you waltzing through life, hoping that everything will work out on its own? Have you established daily, monthly, yearly, and retirement goals? Are you honestly thankful to those who correct you, or do you secretly wish they would keep their thoughts to themselves? Do you know how to say no to things that will not really benefit you? Do you first consider the consequences of the things you say yes to? Do you willingly accept responsibility and follow a task through to completion? Or, do you lose enthusiasm and make excuses why you can't do what you said you would? Some of those questions are confrontive, but they are necessary to properly evaluate our self-discipline, which is vital to effective living and a positive testimony.
2. Are you "a man of one thing" like Bishop Ryle described on page 7? Meditate on Matthew 22:36-40. Ask the Lord to help you love Him supremely above all other things, and to love others with an even greater love than you have for yourself.
3. Are you aware of another believer who has a need? Are you willing to help that person, even if it means sacrificing some of your time, convenience, or money on his behalf? Although many

Christians have real needs that are not of their own doing, some Christians are directly responsible for putting themselves in a desperate situation. Sometimes its easy to get aggravated at other Christians who never seem to get out of a position of dependence on others because of poor decisions in the past or immature character traits. If you know someone like that, consider not only meeting their immediate physical need (the symtom), but also ministering to the spiritual, emotional, or mental deficiency that might have either caused or intensified their problems.

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