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## The Ultimate Training Program!

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.

~John Owen, 17<sup>th</sup> Century Puritan

Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.

~Psalm 127:1



# EIGHT

## The Ultimate Training Program!

Every competitive athlete must live a life marked by *strict training* if their goal is to perform at the peak of their abilities. They understand the truth in the saying that asserts, “**proper preparation produces peak performance.**” Competitive athletes who do not apply themselves to the discipline of *strict training* do not remain competitive for long. Those who are at the highest level of competition refuse to settle for “good enough.” Good enough is never good enough if being your best is your ultimate goal. Hammered into the front wall of our church is a phrase that reads, “*Excellence in all things...all things to the glory of God!*” This is the deepest desire of every disciple of Jesus. So, have you been striving for excellence in all things or has good enough been just that...good enough?

It is one thing to talk about training for competitive activities. It is another thing altogether to talk about training for the Christian life. And make no mistake; God wants every Christian to go into *strict training* to maximize the gifts, talents, and abilities He has given to them in advancing the cause of His Kingdom. The apostle Paul expresses this truth in a remarkable way.

Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. 1 Corinthians 9:25

God’s Word is telling every Christian what is expected as the Christian life is compared to the life of a competitive athlete. The Christian is to have both the attitudes and actions of a competitive athlete for an even greater reason...to get a crown that will last forever. There are two primary aspects of *strict training* in the life of the Christian: ABSTAIN & ADVANCE. The goal of *strict training* is to help us abstain from sin and advance into righteousness. It is not enough to simply see the Christian life as what we abstain from doing (e.g. I don’t drink, smoke, chew, or date women who do). We need to see it as the advancement of the cause of Christ and the purposes of God. To ask God to help us put away our anger is a good thing. To ask God to help us replace it with a spirit of compassion and kindness is a better thing. In other words, we abstain from seeking the good of our own little kingdom, and advance into the expansion of God’s big kingdom.

Before we go on, it needs to be crystal clear that the ultimate training program is not committing to living a life of *strict training*. It is committing ourselves to God as Paul instructs in Romans 12:1, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices,

holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship.” *Our strict training* is not a commitment to ourselves as we run the race set before us. It is a commitment to our God and Him alone. We are not committing to merely the disciplined application of resources (means of grace) but rather, we are committing to God. It is there and only there where we remove the shackles of our old self and begin to grow into the new self. The church has far too many men who have committed themselves to a holy life and not our Holy God.

Paul says we are to offer ourselves, all of ourselves, and to do so *in light of* what God has already done for us. That is why we must preach the gospel to ourselves every day. What we constantly need to keep in view is God’s mercy in the person and work of Jesus Christ. When we do this, we understand that we do not apply the means of grace in order to be blessed, but because we are already blessed. Because our position is secure in Christ we consistently and continually apply the means of grace out of a heart that is overwhelmed with thanksgiving. Jesus has secured our acceptance and approval for us and guarantees them through our union with Him.

Reflect for a moment on the words, “living sacrifice” and the implications of what Paul was stressing. A “living sacrifice” is a sacrifice that is always sacrificing. It never slumbers and it is never silenced. There are no days off and there are no timeouts. It is a life that lives out (imperfectly) the truth of Romans 6:19, “Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness.” Every runner in the race falls from time to time. What we need to remember is falling isn’t failure unless we fail to get up. It is the power of the gospel that continually gets us up and puts us back into the race.

Because of what God in Christ has already done for us, we are pleased to commit to the pursuit of a holy life through the application of the means of grace. For the purpose of our program, I will briefly highlight three: Bible Intake, Prayer, and Corporate Worship. Remember, we are responsible to pursue a life of holiness, but our growing in holiness is always dependent upon the grace of God. It is not a self-disciplined approach we are after but a Savior-dependent approach that relies on the grace of God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Bible has many Scripture verses where our responsibility (work) and our dependence (God’s work) converge in the same verse. One of the best examples of this is our verse for this chapter, “Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain” (Psalm 127:1). The builder builds and the watchmen watch...in total

dependence upon God! To paraphrase what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 3:7, regardless of how much we prepare, plant, and water, only God is able to supply the increase!

## **BIBLE INTAKE**

The best way to speak about the Bible is to let the Bible speak, “Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” (Deuteronomy 8:3b). Someone once recognized a clever acrostic for BIBLE: **B**asic **I**nstructions **B**efore **L**eaving **E**arth. The Bible is indeed a book of “basic instructions” and yet it is so much more. To wit, I have something quite profound I would like to say to you right now...

### **THE BOOK YOU DON'T READ...**

#### ***WON'T HELP!***

Now there are some books in which ignorance will not be of any great and measurable importance in how your life works out. If you miss reading a New York Times best seller or neglect a Dr. Seuss book along the way, your life will not be negatively impacted to any great measure. But there is one book, The Holy Bible, if left unread and unapplied, will cause your life to resemble a ship adrift out on the open sea at the mercy of the strongest winds (life experience and human traditions) that are blowing at the time, eventually causing a man to wind up on the rocks! So, has the Bible been guiding you lately or are you drifting ever so close to the rocks? The authors of *Experiencing God* put it this way.

“The Bible is God’s Word to you. The Holy Spirit honors and uses God’s Word in speaking to you. The Scriptures will be your source of authority for faith and practice. You cannot depend on human traditions, your experience or the experience of others to be accurate authorities on God’s will and ways. Experience and tradition must always be examined against the teaching of Scripture.”<sup>1</sup>

We have been given a great heritage of faith and it would serve us well to study and learn from it, but ALWAYS in the light of sacred Scripture. In John 17:3 we read, “And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” If you want to know more about God (His nature and His will) you will have to become a student of the Scriptures. In doing so, the “Spirit

of truth” (John 14:17) will both reveal and instruct you into all truth. Jerry Bridges rightly observes, “We need to approach the Bible with the deep, settled conviction that it accurately expresses the mind of God and the will of God as to how we are to live.”<sup>2</sup> Remember, the more we study the Bible the more we understand just how *good* the Good News really is.

So, how important is the Word of God to you right now? Have you ever read the Bible all the way through from Genesis to Revelation? It did not happen for me until I was challenged by Pastor Larry Thompson back in the late 90’s and given a great plan for doing it. The Bible I read through then and still do today is the Life Application Bible. Below are four tips to help encourage, inspire, and motivate you to read every Word from “In the beginning God” to “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all. Amen!”

### **1. Prayerfully Plan**

As it has been said, “Nobody plans to fail, but most fail to plan.” If you don’t prayerfully plan out how you will accomplish the goal of reading the Bible from cover to cover, you won’t. Set aside a special place that is quiet and conducive for reading a few minutes each day. Set aside a designated time that you will commit to *Bible Intake* each day, and don’t get tipped over when you miss a day(s). We all do.

### **2. Study Bible**

I recommend using a study Bible that includes a number of valuable features (book introductions, chronological timelines, character profiles, maps, commentary notes, etc.) to illumine and motivate you to continue pressing on in your study and intake of God’s Holy Word.

### **3. Read The Word Reflectively With Positive Anticipation**

To read the Bible reflectively is to read it thoughtfully, carefully, and slowly. The Word of God to Joshua was a reminder to read the Word reflectively, “This book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success” (Joshua 1:8).

To read it with positive anticipation is to read it expecting God's best for you. Many people read the Bible with suspicion and reservation that cuts them off from the blessings that naturally flow from *Bible Intake*. Expect the Bible to instruct you and it will. Expect the Bible to bless you and it will. Expect the Bible to grow you and it will. Bryan Chapell writes, "The Bible was originally written in the language of common folk and will be best interpreted when we understand that most of its meaning is in plain sight." <sup>3</sup>

#### **4. Look For Life Application**

The ancient wisdom in the Bible was not only relevant for Biblical times, it is relevant for all times, and is a constant source of practical advice for living a meaningful and significant life. I remember when Dr. Sproul, while teaching a seminary class said, "to be sure, there is only one truth for every Scripture. But there are countless life applications if we are willing to search for them." Once you find them, by God's grace, don't forget to apply them, regardless of the cost or circumstance! It was well said about the Bereans in Acts 17:11, "Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so." May this be the confession of our lives as well.

#### **PRAYER**

I have never known a person who doesn't pray. I don't know to whom many of them pray, but nevertheless, they pray. Prayer is simply a part of life for both the believer and the non-believer alike. However, the only prayer that will avail much is the one sincerely offered by the believer to the Triune God. In James 5:16 (KJV) we read, "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." When James says that prayer will "avail much" he is telling us there is real power in prayer to positively impact our lives. Daniel knew the power in prayer and prayed three times a day. David knew the power in prayer and poured out his heart daily to God. Paul and Silas knew the power in prayer even in the darkness of a dungeon. Do you know the power in prayer? What does the confession of your life say?

Going back to what I mentioned earlier, we are responsible to apply the means of grace but we are totally dependent upon God for the increase. Jerry Bridges writes, "Prayer is the tangible expression of our dependence. We may assent to the fact that we are dependent on Christ, but if our prayer life is meager 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." <sup>4</sup>

In closing out this portion on prayer let's take a look at the two reasons we have for living a life of prayer. We have been both *instructed* and *invited* to pray.

### **1. Instructed**

We need look no further than the life of Jesus to see His instruction to pray lived out in a life consumed by continual communion with the Father. In Mark 1:35 we read, "And rising very early in the morning while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed." In Luke 5:15-16 we read, "But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray." Prayer was to Jesus as water is to a fish. What is prayer to you?

Jesus not only instructed us to pray by the practice of His life, he preached it as well. In the parable of the unjust judge we read these words, "And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart" (Luke 18:1). Unlike when we tell someone they ought to do something, when Jesus says we ought to do something it now becomes a divine duty. The prayer life Jesus lived in both word and deed as revealed in the Scriptures must serve as a normative standard for every child of God born or grace.

### **2. Invited**

The writer of Hebrews delivers his invitation this way, "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). In Matthew 18:19-20 we read the invitation of our Lord, "Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

What a privilege we have to enter into the presence of our God. Paul writes in Romans 5:1-2, "therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God." I remember reading an article written by Dr. John Gerstner, the father of my first seminary professor, identifying the first fruit of our justification as peace with God. He went on to say that the reconciliation we now have with God gives us access to Him through prayer, anytime, anywhere!

As a pastor, when I address the subject of prayer, generally two questions come up, “Why pray if God knows what we need?” and “Does prayer really change anything?” We have covered the “why” question so let’s answer the “change” question. Yes, prayer changes things, two things: us and things. It does not however change God’s mind and if you took anytime to truly consider what it would mean if it did, you would shudder to think of the possibilities and consequences. God uses prayer as a means to work His ends in this world. We must never think we can bind the conscience of Almighty God. What we must know is that our God is so pleased to use our prayers as mighty instruments to fulfill His will in this fallen, broken, and hurting world.

If we are going to mature and grow up by the Spirit we must be in constant contact with the Spirit and that comes through prayer. And just as we need a plan to read the Scriptures, we need a plan to pray. Again, just like studying the Bible, we need a quiet place and an appropriate time to spend in prayer. Now I am not saying that this is the only time we are to be in prayer. Our lives are to be lived in a posture of prayer as we continually communicate with God throughout the day. What I am saying is unless you make a plan for your prayer life, your prayer life will leave you wanting.

## **CORPORATE WORSHIP**

Alexander Whyte, a well-known Scottish preacher suggested “that the Christian Sabbath was the ‘sign of a standing or falling church’ and ‘an infallible sign of the state of true religion in a land, in a church, in a family, and in a man’s own heart and life’. There is perhaps no surer sign of a falling Christian than a growing neglect of Sabbath day ordinances, and an indolent and profane abuse of its sacred and priceless hours. There is no bulwark that parents can build up around their children’s religion and morality like a well-kept Sabbath day; and there is no surer sign that a young man is declining from faith and personal religion than when he begins to find his own pleasure and do his own way on the Lord’s holy day.”<sup>5</sup>

Make no mistake, the careless use and misuse of the Sabbath day is a sure sign of a heart that has grown cold in its love of the Savior. When we begin to treat the Sabbath just like any other day in the week we are making the statement to God and the world around us that we have lost our appetite for the things of God. Desecration of the Sabbath is a sure sign of spiritual sickness that opens the door for the devil to enter in and work his destruction in the lives of the saints. Herman Hoeksema writes, “It cannot be denied that desecration of the Sabbath is in our day an evil that is assuming alarming

proportions, and that the danger is more than imaginary that the Christian pilgrim, as he lives and travels through this strange land, will defile his garments and adopt the habits of the world. 6 So, have your garments been defiled? How about adopting some of the habits of this world?

We have just highlighted three resources or means of grace God has given to us. He has given countless others that He is so pleased to use in the lives of His people to fulfill His purposes in this world. Locked deep into our DNA are the sins of self-sufficiency and autonomy, which drive us to live independent of the Almighty even in the bright light of knowing we are fully dependent creatures. That is why it would serve us well to close out this lesson with the words of our Lord, “By myself I can do nothing” (John 5:30). If Jesus could do nothing by Himself what can we expect to do by ourselves? Jesus lived a life fully dependent upon the Father and this is the life we must live too. We must live a disciplined life in applying all the resources God has so graciously given. But we must never forget that we are totally dependent upon God for every step we take in the race He has set before us.

1. Henry T. Blackaby & Claude V. King, *Experiencing God*, Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994, 4
2. Jerry Bridges, *Disciplines of Grace*, NavPress, 174
3. Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, Baker Academic, 2006, 121
4. Jerry Bridges, *Disciplines of Grace*, NavPress, 140
5. The Banner of Truth Trust, Issue 424, January 1999, 17
6. Herman Hoeksema, *Proper Sabbath Observance Pamphlet*, PRCA, 1



## BROTHER TO BROTHER

1. Our duty and God's grace are nowhere opposed in the matter of sanctification.  Agree  Disagree Please explain

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2. The goal of strict training is to help us abstain from sin and advance into righteousness? Please explain

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3. What are the implications of being a "living sacrifice" as Paul says in Romans 12:1?

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4. How important is Bible intake to you? How much time do you spend in the Word each day?

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5. How important is prayer to you? What changes do you need to make in your prayer life?

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6. The careless use and misuse of the Sabbath day is a sure sign of a heart that has grown cold in its love of the Savior?  Agree  Disagree Please explain

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7. How are you doing in your Sabbath day observance? Are there any changes you would like to make? Please explain

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