

# HABITS OF THE HEART

## THE IMPORTANCE OF DISCIPLINE IN OUR THOUGHT-LIFE

Such as are your habitual thoughts,  
such also will be the character of your mind;  
for the soul is dyed by the thoughts.  
—MARCUS AURELIUS, *Meditations*

Ours is an age of undisciplined thinking. The habits of the mind are gravely neglected. And the Christian, being not exempt, is greatly weakened because of it. The need for a disciplined mind is incurable. Every generation suffers from its lack. This is the keynote of our study.

## STEWARDED THE REDEEMED MIND

Are we disciples of Christ in mind? Is ours an inward as well as outward discipleship? We are called to be ‘disciples’—disciplined students and servants of the Lord and Master. But outward discipline is not the truest measure of discipline. There is no true disciple in mind who is not also one in body; but outward practices do not always represent practices inward. No one can presume to serve Christ with their life who does not serve Him with their mind. We have not the right to claim to be disciples if we do not consciously discipline our minds after Christ. It has wisely been said that “those who only learn accidentally and follow incidentally are not true disciples.”<sup>1</sup>

A wide gap exists among Christians between knowing and doing, believing and living, and the issue that is not addressed enough in our day is the life of the mind. We think a lot, we just don't always honor God in our thoughts. All people think, just not all think in a godly manner. Most Christians host a “free-range” life of the mind while outwardly seeking to maintain an appearance, reputation, and pattern of life that is acceptable and pleasing to God and others. But as Jeremiah Burroughs puts it, “God does not judge in regards to outward appearance; what is this before the Lord? What is it to have gold and fine clothes before God? The things that are grand in the world and attract the eye—what are these to God? God does not esteem men at all for these things.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Don Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 20.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah Burroughs, *Moses His Choice, with His Eye Fixed upon Heaven* (London: M. F. for R.D., 1641), 216-17.

We don't seem to view our thought-life biblically. Jesus warned, "Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment" (John 7:24). The life of the mind is the most important life that we live. Repeatedly the Lord reminds us that He looks upon "every intention of the thoughts of [man's] heart" (Genesis 6:5). The Lord is always "discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). Jesus powerfully rebuked, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean" (Matthew 23:25-26). The picture is clear: the "outside of the cup" is the outward, observable life while the "inside of the cup" is the inner, invisible life of the mind. The first order of responsibility, then, is to tend to the inner life so that our love to God would be true and not hypocritical lip service.

The hope of outward reform rests entirely on inward renewal. Self-discipline is a tool suited to promote godly stewardship of the redeemed mind.

## A RESPONSIBILITY OF ALL CHRISTIANS

The discipline of the mind is a responsibility of all Christians, and therefore a subject for all Christians. It is not restricted in scope to any particular class. Nor is it merely contemplative. God redeems minds to be godly, and godliness is about character, and every Christian should be pursuing a Christ-like character. The discipline of the mind, therefore, is for teachers and students, employers and employees, officials and professionals as well as the retired, unemployed, or disabled. It is for those who care for children, for those who must mow lawns, wash dishes, and do laundry. It is for the young and the mature, the healthy and the sick, the strong and the weak. It is for fair weather days and for storms. It is for all in Christ—indiscriminately.

## A MEANS OF GRACE

At this point, we must remind ourselves that true righteousness is unattained and unattainable through human effort. We are reminded over and over that we are "those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness" (Romans 5:17). This free gift of righteousness, then, is the ground and not the goal of our discipline.

In the truest sense, discipline does not produce the change within; it facilitates the Spirit's work. Paul writes, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12-13). So the discipline of the mind is not a new legalism, it is a means of grace to be exercised. Charles Spurgeon emphasized the point this way: "I must take care above all that I cultivate communion with Christ, for though that can never be the basis of my peace—mark that—yet it will be the channel of it." In his well-known *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster puts it this way:

If all human strivings end in moral bankruptcy, and if righteousness is a gracious gift from God, then is it not logical to conclude that we must wait for God to come and transform us? Strangely enough, the answer is “no.” The analysis is correct: human striving is insufficient and righteousness is a gift from God. It is the conclusion that is faulty, for happily there is something we can do. We do not need to be hung on the horns of the dilemma of either human works or idleness. God has given us the disciplines of the spiritual life as a means of receiving His grace. The disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so that He can transform us. ... A farmer is helpless to grow grain; all he can do is to provide the right conditions for the growing of grain. He puts the seed in the ground where the natural forces take over and up comes the grain. That is the way with the spiritual disciplines—they are a way of sowing to the Spirit. The disciplines are God's way of getting us into the ground; they put us where He can work within us and transform us. By themselves the spiritual disciplines can do nothing; they can only get us to the place where something can be done. They are God's means of grace.<sup>3</sup>

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*Train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.*

*1 Timothy 4:7-8*

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## The Goal: Godliness

Of first importance is the goal of Christian training or discipline, which is godliness. The Scripture plainly states, “Train yourself *for godliness*.”

We must emphasize the importance of keeping the goal of discipline in view at all times. Donald Whitney says “discipline without direction is drudgery.”<sup>4</sup> He illustrates by describing a child who reluctantly sits in his room practicing his guitar while he watches his buddies play baseball in the park across the street. But after the child was granted a vision of him later in life performing in a Carnegie Hall concert, and being told that the only way that this will come to pass is if he practiced, his whole attitude toward the discipline of practice changed. The key was having the goal in mind. The most important feature of discipline is its purpose.<sup>5</sup> And the purpose of disciplining the mind is godliness.

Godliness involves imaging God, conforming to His likeness, revering His ways, and devoting one's self to Him. Love to God represents the greatest honor that a creature made in His image can render to Him. Godliness delights in the Lord and His ways, and love to God is the first and greatest commandment that we can delight in—it is the highest purpose of godliness (cf. Mark 12:30).

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<sup>3</sup> Foster, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Whitney, 15.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 17.

Who better has imaged God than Christ? Is there any more ‘godly’ man than Jesus? All in Christ have been “predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Romans 8:29). John writes, “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). The goal of our sanctification is to be like Christ, this is godliness. Godliness can be no more definite than Christlikeness.

Could it be that, at least in part, we lack the drive for discipline because we want the benefits of Christ more than we want Christ? Could it be that we are more interested, practically speaking, in justification than sanctification? Could it be that the idea of forgiveness is more exciting than the idea of becoming more like Christ? We cannot speak of loving God unless we understand it in light of Christlikeness.

Christlikeness cannot be pursued haphazardly. Many Christians are quite disciplined in the trades or financial markets or politics or education or sports or technology or sciences. It seems that discipline is accepted as axiomatically necessary in life; it is seen as a way of life for everything else but godliness—as though becoming like Jesus is not supposed to require much effort. Do we truly think that achieving a high grade point average requires more discipline than becoming like Christ? Do we really believe that landing that job, earning that position, closing that deal, breaking that record, achieving that bonus, securing that contract, winning that someone, etc., will take more effort than becoming like Jesus?

How determined we can be to reach goals of such inferior worth while neglecting to cultivate our minds to pursue the goal of godliness. If we are to “no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds” (Ephesians 4:17), but rather “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:10), then we must make use of whatever means are available to us with intention toward the goal. Stephen Charnock illustrates, “There is no man that intends seriously an end, but he intends means in order to that end; as when a man intends the preservation or recovery of his health, he will intend means in order to those ends, otherwise he cannot be said to intend his health.”<sup>6</sup> If we are serious about the goal of loving God—which is the highest purpose of godliness—we will be serious about the means of disciplining our minds for godliness.

The command is to train, or discipline, yourself for godliness. Discipline, then, is commended to us as an essential means to conform us to the image of Christ, the very thing that a regenerate mind always wants to be. Tom Landry, coach of the Dallas Cowboys, says, “The job of a football coach is to make men do what they don’t want to do in order to achieve what they’ve always wanted to be.” So also in this life, we may have to do what we don’t

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen Charnock, *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1864–1866), 193.

want to do in order to become more like Christ, whom we love and desire to be like in increasing measure. The goal is worthy of our best effort.

## The Means: Train Yourself

Everything in life worth achieving requires discipline. God's Word says, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it" (1 Corinthians 9:24). To the Philippians Paul says, "I press on to make it my own" that is "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:12, 14). To "press on" (*diōkō*) is to exert one's self toward an objective with straining. It is a strong verb, often translated 'persecute', illustrating the intensity of its pursuit. The pursuit is "in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:12 NASB). The verb behind "to make it my own" (ESV) or "lay hold of" (NASB) (*katalambanō*) means to seize or grasp with force so as to attain, win, or make one's own possession with certainty. It is a strong verb that portrays the likes of a large wild cat coming down on its prey with such a deadly strike that the win of its pursuit is secure. It is the same word used in 1 Corinthians 9:24, "So run that you may obtain (*katalambanō*) it." So in one sense, the Spirit-filled Christian is exhorted to achieve a goal with vigorous effort. Yet, like the apostle who penned these exhortations, we are to constantly remind ourselves that it is "by the grace of God [that] I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me" (1 Co 15:10). This is why in the immediate context, Paul would say that he presses on to make Christ his own, "because Christ Jesus has made me his own" (Philippians 3:12). The principle of vigorous training, running the race, and self-disciplining are elsewhere expressed in terms of working out (*katergazomai*: work toward an effect): "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12-13).

The words, "train yourself for godliness" make it plain that this is a command of God, an imperative instruction that extends to all in Christ. Discipline in the Christian life is not optional. The key word of the verse is 'train' (*gymnadzō*), from which we get the words gymnastics and gymnasium. It is variously translated 'train' (ESV), 'discipline' (NASB), and 'exercise' (KJV), but always conveys the intense discipline by which athletes of the first-century were distinguished. Athletic training in the Greco-Roman culture involved three necessities: (1) exertion, (2) habits, and (3) focus. We will explore these one at a time.

### 1 — EXERT YOUR MIND FOR GODLINESS

What price are we willing to pay to honor Christ? Every Olympic gold medalist has a story to tell concerning the cost of their skill. Serious competitors in the Olympic Games live rigorously disciplined lives by necessity. Any training worthy of the name involves

exertion. These points are nicely captured in Phillips' translation of 1 Corinthians 9:25: "Every competitor in athletic events goes into serious training. Athletes will take tremendous pains." It remarkable when people work harder at games than life? How much more the life of the mind. It has well been said, "no athlete is so called upon to train his body as a king to train his soul."<sup>7</sup>

## 2 — HABITUATE YOUR MIND FOR GODLINESS

No habit is more crucial than a habit of the mind. And as far as discipleship goes, it is quite nonsensical to try changing behavioral habits without changing the habits of the mind.

Diligence and exertion are not the whole story. Paul reminds us, "An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules" (2 Tim 2:5). Augustine once challenged a young runner by reminding him, "You may be making great strides, but are you running outside the track?" I remember a poster from my childhood which struck me. It pictured a boy shoveling snow out of the drive way, obviously for his father since he was in the background watching. The problem was that the boy was not paying attention and in his zeal was shoveling the snow from the driveway into the walkway! The caption read something like, "It's not how hard you work, but what you get done that counts." The serious athlete must both exert himself and train to compete according to the rules.

It requires discipline to keep Christ central in our daily lives. Jesus said, "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell" (Matthew 5:29–30). It has wisely been said that maintaining an undefiled thought life demands strict self-discipline.

We typically see sin as isolated acts of moral disobedience. But we must remember the athletic training analogy and understand that we are creatures of habit. We have been created as habitual creatures for efficiency. Because we are creatures of habit, we can progress in life through learning. We need not relearn how to walk, talk, eat, or tie our shoes. The same is true spiritually. But sin takes advantage of this efficiency for evil. We must see our sins not as isolated acts of disobedience, but in the context of habits—habits of the mind.

This is why, as Foster reminds us, willpower will never succeed in dealing with the deeply ingrained habits of sin. He goes on to say,

Our ordinary method of dealing with ingrained sin is to launch a frontal attack. We rely on our willpower and determination. Whatever the issue for us may be—anger, bitterness, gluttony, pride, sexual lust, alcohol, fear—we determine never to do it again; we pray

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<sup>7</sup> Isocrates, *Ad Nicoclem*, 11.

against it, fight against it, set our will against it. But it is all in vain, and we find ourselves once again morally bankrupt or, worse yet, so proud of our external righteousness that 'whitened sepulchers' is a mild description of our condition.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Habits Strengthen Habits***

It was Leighton who said, "The way of sin is downhill; a man cannot stop when he wants to." We cannot expect to overcome habits by sheer willpower or isolated efforts; change requires a change of habits. Augustine urged that we mind our "daily littles." He frequently alluded to the subtle power of little things. In one place he illustrates his point with the plagues of Egypt, saying that tiny insects, if they be numerous enough, will be as harmful as the bite of great beasts. He says that a hill of sand, though composed of tiny grains, will crush a man as surely as the same weight of lead. Elsewhere he points out that tiny drops of rain make the river just as little leaks sink great ships. He urges not to despise little things but make great use of them. Sanctification progresses one choice at a time through daily littles. Horatius Bonar echoes the same when he writes, "The Christian life is a great thing, one of the greatest things on earth. Made up of daily littles, it is yet in itself not a little thing."<sup>9</sup> Likewise, J.C. Ryle reminds us,

Habits have deep roots. Once sin is allowed to settle in your heart, it will not be turned out at your bidding. Custom becomes second nature, and its chains are not easily broken. The prophet has well said, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard its spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil" (Jeremiah 13:23). Habits are like stones rolling down hill—the further they roll, the faster and more ungovernable is their course. Habits, like trees, are strengthened by age. A boy may bend an oak when it is a sapling--a hundred men cannot root it up, when it is a full grown tree. A child can wade over the Thames River at its fountain-head--the largest ship in the world can float in it when it gets near the sea. So it is with habits: the older the stronger—the longer they have held possession, the harder they will be to cast out. They grow with our growth, and strengthen with our strength. Custom is the nurse of sin. Every fresh act of sin lessens fear and remorse, hardens our hearts, blunts the edge of our conscience, and increases our evil inclination. ... Believe me, you cannot stand still in your souls. Habits of good or evil are daily strengthening in your hearts. Every day you are either getting nearer to God, or further off.<sup>10</sup>

Spence succinctly captures this point: "A sinful thought, brought again and again before the mind, strengthens the natural tendency of the will to evil and leads to the sinful deed. Therefore the thoughts must be disciplined and brought into captivity to the law of Christ."<sup>11</sup>

"There is no slavery that can compare to the slavery of ingrained habits of sin."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Foster, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Horatius Bonar, *God's Way of Holiness*, 127.

<sup>10</sup> Ryle, 15-16.

<sup>11</sup> Spence, *Pulpit Commentary* [1909], 162.

<sup>12</sup> Foster, 4.

### 3 — FOCUS YOUR MIND FOR GODLINESS

We must cultivate a fixed aim in our everyday thought life.

## The Value: Present and Eternal

This is a promise. We are to be motivated by the promise that discipling the mind will bring us great value and enable us to love God more dearly, more pervasively, and more consistently. The value of disciplining the mind speaks of that which is beneficial, useful or advantageous. The tense of this promise points to and stresses the continuous nature of the benefit. The phrase, “in every way,” accents the pervasive value of the discipline of mind. The statement, “as it holds promise,” designates content. This promise has substance and weight, value that is inherent in the training. In the end, it cannot be measured.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.  
—**Matthew 6:21**

*Where your treasure is, on earth or in heaven, there will you heart be.* We are therefore concerned to be right and wise in the choice of our *treasure*, because the temper of our minds, and consequently the tenor of our lives, will be accordingly either carnal or spiritual, earthly or heavenly. The *heart* follows the *treasure*, as the needle follows the loadstone, or the sunflower the sun. *Where the treasure is there* the value and esteem are, *there* the love and affection are (Col. 3:2), that way the desires and pursuits go, thitherward the aims and intents are levelled, and all is done with that in view. *Where the treasure is, there* our cares and fears are, lest we come short of it; about that we are most solicitous; *there* our hope and trust are (Prov. 18:10, 11); *there* our joys and delights will be (Ps. 119:111); and *there* our thoughts will be, there the *inward* thought will be, the *first* thought, the *free* thought, the *fixed* thought, the *frequent*, the *familiar* thought. The *heart* is God's due (Prov. 23:26), and that he may have it, our *treasure* must be laid up with him, and then our souls will be lifted up to him.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 1640.