

SESSION 1

The Benefit of Spiritual Disciplines



QUESTION 1:

What are some odd habits you've observed in others?

THE POINT

Growth in Christ occurs when we practice spiritual disciplines.

THE PASSAGE

1 Timothy 4:1-10

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

We have good habits, maybe a few bad habits, and perhaps a—well—an unusual habit. For example, some of us ...

- ▶ tuck ourselves tightly into bed at night, a habit we started as children to protect ourselves from the monster under the bed.
- ▶ say “Wed-nes-day” phonetically when we need to write it out.
- ▶ pat down our pockets to ensure our wallets, keys, and phone are there—even if we put them there moments ago.

The writer Voltaire drank 40-50 cups of coffee—every day! That may sound like a bad habit, but Voltaire also lived to the age of 83. The artist Michelangelo slept in the same clothes for days on end and avoided baths. Again, this doesn’t sound healthy, but Michelangelo lived to the age of 89.

We might debate whether certain habits are good or bad, but some things we can do are definitely good for us. Anything we do that helps us grow in our walk with Christ is definitely good, and we would do well to discipline ourselves to do these regularly and faithfully.

1 Timothy 4:1-3

1 Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils;

2 Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron;

3 Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.

God has provided many good things for us, but the world seeks to distort them. Paul said this would happen, referring specifically to “latter times.” Paul mentioned this again in his Second Letter to Timothy; there he referred to “the last days” (2 Tim. 3:1). Both expressions carry the same meaning—the days between Jesus’ ascension into heaven and His return. As the end gets closer—and His return becomes imminent—the world will be busy “giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils.”

Sadly, what is happening today is nothing new. As Paul did in his day, we see those who “depart from the faith.” People can claim to follow Jesus, but such claims do not prove they have a new life or a relationship with Jesus. Departing from the teachings of Christianity and failing to live in obedience to Christ gives evidence that such people never had a relationship with Jesus to begin with. (See John 14:23-24.)

Those who depart from the faith do not lose their salvation, because they weren’t saved to begin with. They are led astray by liars whose consciences have been seared, people who offer a counterfeit spirituality. These people are hypocrites who engage in willful deception. In their deceit, they seek to distort the things of God. Paul gave two examples.

1. **Marriage.** These deceivers, Paul wrote, will forbid people to marry. As the apostle wrote this letter to Timothy, the pastor of the church in Ephesus, the church was under attack from ascetics who prohibited people from getting married. The covenant of marriage is God’s good gift, and His people should celebrate it. Jesus endorsed marriage: the joining together of one man and one woman in a lifelong relationship (Matt. 19:4-8); indeed, the setting of His inaugural public ministry was a wedding feast (John 2:1-11). While Paul did leave room for those who chose not to marry so that they could more fully devote themselves to God’s work, he did not forbid marriage; instead, he encouraged people in all circumstances to find God’s will for their marital status (1 Cor. 7:8-16).

Marriage is God’s good gift and is the foundation for family life in the home. Marriage is honorable (Heb. 13:4) and was part of God’s original design (Gen. 1:27-28). Likewise, marriage is the right relationship for wholesome sexual expression that results in increased intimacy, emotional fulfillment, and in some cases, children. Without the marriage commitment, people are more likely to express their sexuality in unhealthy ways with multiple partners, resulting in unstable lives for any children they have.

2. **Food.** The deceivers also will demand that the people abstain from eating certain foods—“meats, which God hath created” for them to eat. In the garden of Eden, God allowed Adam and Eve to eat fruit “of every tree of the garden” except for “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (2:16-17). After the flood, in His covenant with Noah, God said that every moving thing would be food for them (9:3). While the Old Testament law restricted the children of Israel from eating some animals (Deut. 14:3-21), God later clarified that Peter was free to eat anything “God hath cleansed” (Acts 10:15).

The hypocrites and deceivers Paul described were not promoting moderation or even making healthy choices. They were deceitfully teaching the people not to accept good gifts from the hands of God. Yet marriage and food are wonderful gifts God created for us, which we should receive with gratitude. To accept the distorted teachings of the deceivers is to reject God as Provider and view Him instead as a tempter who created humanity with needs and desires but without a way to satisfy them. Instead of appreciating His gifts, we would become bitter and ungrateful.

Our lives are to be grounded in our relationship with Christ, but by placing regulations on how we are to nurture and enjoy that relationship, spirituality becomes misguided. Such self-denying practices distort our understanding of God, our gratitude toward Him, and our walk with Him.

QUESTION 2:

What are some examples of good things that have been distorted by our culture?

1 Timothy 4:4-7a

4 For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving:

5 For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.

6 If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine, whereunto thou hast attained.

7a But refuse profane and old wives' fables,

Instead of rejecting the good things God has given to us, we are to receive and be thankful for God's good gifts. God's creation is good.

On the sixth day, when “God saw every thing that he had made,” He declared that “it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). No exceptions. He made no mistakes. There were no errors. In totality and in each detail, it was very good.

I’ve never had that experience. Whenever I look at something I’ve built, I always see imperfections—places where it is not quite plumb, level, square, or smooth. But when God looked at His creation, He did not say that it was just OK or that it would do; He said “it was very good” (v. 31). Paul stressed, “every creature of God is good”; therefore, we can receive it all “with thanksgiving.”

Those two things go together: God’s good gifts and our thanks. We are to receive His good gifts, and then be thankful for them. When we receive His good gifts with thankfulness, we foster a spirit of gratitude, not a sense of entitlement. Paul specifically mentioned marriage and food, but it is also true with all of God’s creation. We receive and express thanks for all of creation, because it comes from His hand.

The gift reflects the giver. The gifts that we receive from the hands of God are holy, and are to be accepted with thankful hearts, received prayerfully, and used responsibly according to His Word.

While it is true that all of creation is good, it is also true that our abuse of what God has provided is bad. Using the earlier examples of marriage and food, when we abuse our sexuality or use it outside of God’s design, we are headed for destruction. Also when we abuse food—for example, as in gluttony—it leads to our harm. Paul did not teach freedom without limits; instead he reinforced the goodness of God’s creation.

Paul urged Timothy to teach those he served. He was to correct the deceivers’ false teaching by focusing the believers’ attention on applying God’s truth. Our conduct must always be in line with the unchanging teachings of God’s Word, not on society’s ever-changing standards. This is no longer the case in our modern culture, however. For example, a May 2019 Gallup poll showed that a majority of Americans think the following are OK:

- ▶ Divorce (77%)
- ▶ Premarital sex (71%)
- ▶ Homosexuality (63%)¹

These opinions are not in accord with biblical teachings. God's unchanging Word, not society's consensus of acceptable behavior, is our guide.

Knowing God's truth is the starting point for shaping our conduct according to His truth. Paul reiterated what he had written earlier in this letter to Timothy (1 Tim. 1:3-11). Paul was insistent that God's people must know and align their lives to biblical instruction, "the sound doctrine according to the glorious gospel" (vv. 10-11).

When we focus on God's truth, we can avoid "profane and old wives' fables." By *profane and old wives' fables*, Paul was certainly referring to the teachings of abstinence from food or marriage, but the principle expands beyond those two teachings. The best way to know when a teaching is counterfeit is to be acquainted with the real thing.

In the United States, the counterfeit economy is staggering. In fiscal year 2017, U.S. Customs and Border Protection seized about \$1.2 billion in counterfeit goods. Counterfeiting is a major problem for consumers shopping online. While much of the problem resides with small websites, even giants like Amazon admit there is a problem with their third-party sellers, and they are working to mitigate the problem. While these efforts help, the best protection is an informed consumer. One of the ways experts say consumers can protect themselves is to "know the hallmarks of the real product."²

The same is true with avoiding "old wives' fables." To avoid falling prey to silly myths, we must know the hallmarks of truth—and we find truth in God's Word.

QUESTION 3:

What are some teachings you've heard are biblical but really aren't?

ENGAGE

First Timothy 4:4 says that “every creature of God is good.” Use the space below to list one or more “good” things you have recently encountered from the following categories.

In nature:

At home:

At work:

Write a prayer to God, thanking Him for these good things in your life.

1 Timothy 4:7b-10

7b and exercise thyself rather unto godliness.

8 For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.

9 This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance.

10 For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe.

We ended the previous section on Paul's emphasis and command to avoid "profane and old wives' fables" (v. 7). The apostle immediately followed with a second command: "exercise thyself rather unto godliness." The first command is incomplete without the second. Just as refraining from doing wrong is incomplete unless we also do what is right; avoiding silly myths is incomplete unless we also train ourselves in godliness.

QUESTION 4:

What are the challenges and benefits of training ourselves in godliness?

Athletes endure the rigors of training so that they can enjoy peak performance when they compete. Musicians invest hours in practice so that their voices blend together in full, rich tones. Actors rehearse their lines repeatedly so that they "hit their mark," which allows the scene to come alive for their audiences. Similarly, believers discipline themselves so that they can live out God's plan for their lives.

Training is hard work. We'll find no shortcuts to achieving our best, but that doesn't keep people from trying to enjoy the benefits of training with little or no effort. For instance, scientists at the Salk

Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, California, are testing compounds they can put into a pill to produce the same effects as exercise. One proposed pill promises increased endurance and weight control without the need to run a single step.³

Maybe a scientific breakthrough will come, rendering physical exercise optional, but nobody will ever find shortcuts to spiritual growth. Just as rigorous training, hours of practice, and strict rehearsals improve the performance of athletes, musicians, and actors, diligent spiritual discipline benefits followers of Christ in this life. However, spiritual discipline also will benefit believers in the life to come. It holds “promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.” Physical exercise is good for us, but spiritual discipline is even more important because it has eternal consequences.

This is why believers must be willing to train. “We both labour and suffer reproach” because it is worth the effort. Laboring and striving do not denote easy activities. In fact, they often are quite rigorous—Paul did not encourage Timothy (or us) to take the easy path. Instead, we are to take the best path—the one that leads to godliness.

One of the ways we train is by practicing spiritual disciplines, those “small things Christians intentionally do to open themselves to God’s work of conforming them to the image of Christ.”⁴ Practicing spiritual disciplines is an intentional act. Just as an athlete, musician, or actor deliberately chooses to invest hours to achieve their potential, we must make an intentional choice to grow. When we practice spiritual disciplines, we open ourselves up to God’s working in us so that He can produce godliness in us. Practicing spiritual disciplines promotes spiritual growth.

Athletes are strategic with their workouts. They do specific workouts to address exact performance goals. Some workouts are for endurance, others for strength, and still others for flexibility. Each specific workout has an intended result in mind. Believers can be just as strategic in practicing spiritual disciplines.

- ▶ To avoid silly myths and falling prey to gospel counterfeits, believers study their Bibles.
- ▶ To fight temptation, believers pray for strength, enter into accountability relationships, and memorize Scripture.
- ▶ To increase their intimacy with God, believers meditate on Scripture and practice heartfelt prayer.
- ▶ To maintain their focus on Jesus, believers practice fasting and confession of their sins.
- ▶ To form connections with other believers and build up the church, believers fellowship with other believers, worship God, and serve one another.
- ▶ To make a difference in the world, believers prioritize God's work in the church and the world, resulting in God's glory.

As important as the spiritual disciplines are, our confidence is not in the spiritual disciplines. Our confidence and hope are in God who is working through our obedience to conform us into Christ's image. While we cannot manufacture godliness on our own, God will use our disciplined training to produce godliness in our lives.

QUESTION 5:

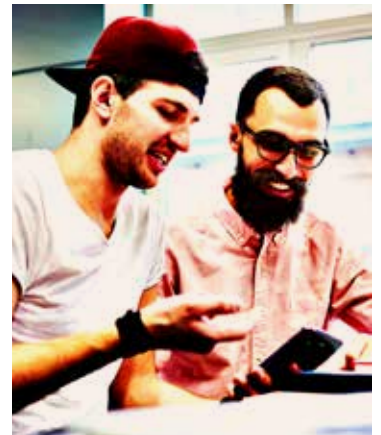
How can we help one another train ourselves in godliness?

LIVE IT OUT

What will you do to “exercise thyself ... unto godliness?”

- ▶ **Commit.** Commit to prepare for and attend every session of this study on spiritual disciplines.
- ▶ **Invest time.** Add an additional thirty minutes each day to your quiet time for the next six weeks to practice the spiritual disciplines covered in this study.
- ▶ **Disciple.** Develop a relationship with a new or young believer (of your same gender) to encourage his or her growth in Christ.

The best chance our neighbors have to learn about the truth may depend on our godliness. Perhaps people in your life are counting on you to be godly. Because of the need around us and in us, we must “both labour and suffer reproach” to be in shape spiritually.



END NOTES

1. "Moral Issues," *Gallup*, news.gallup.com/poll/1681/moral-issues.aspx.
2. Herb Weisbaum, "Shop online? Here's how to spot counterfeit electronics, cosmetics, clothes and more," *Better*, May 14, 2019, nbcnews.com/better/lifestyle/shop-online-here-s-how-spot-counterfeit-electronics-cosmetics-clothes-ncna1005401.
3. Marlene Cemons, "An exercise pill may be in the future for those incapable of working out," *Washington Post*, March 4, 2018, washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/an-exercise-pill-may-be-in-the-future-for-those-incapable-of-working-out/2018/03/02/e8af9370-1bdb-11e8-ae5a-16e60e4605f3_story.html?utm_term=.4995cee4e7c9.
4. Jim L. Wilson, *Soul Shaping: Disciplines that Conform you to the image of Christ* (Nashville: LifeWay, 2009), 23.