

Biblical Change 3- Discipline For Our Choices

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Gary Player, one of South Africa's most successful golfers would often be out practising, when he'd be approached by someone, who'd say to him, "I'd give anything if I could hit a golf ball like you." And Player would usually say something polite and kind in reply. But on one occasion, he was hot, tired, and on that day, Player couldn't resist correcting the person, "No, you wouldn't. You'd give anything to hit a golf ball like me, if it were *easy*." Gary Player then went on to list out all the things someone would have to do to hit a ball like he did. "You've got to get up at five o'clock in the morning, go out and hit a thousand golf balls, walk up to the club house to put a bandage on your hand where it started bleeding, then go and hit another thousand golf balls. That's what you'd have to give, if you want to hit a golf ball like me."

Discipline was the key to hitting a golf ball like that. The harder he practised, the easier it looked to others. He changed in his golfing from good to great, through discipline. A few years ago we hosted Stan Rotman, a Jewish believer in Christ, who is a concert pianist. He travels to churches and ministry groups, gives a full concert of works which he plays entirely from memory, and gives his testimony of faith in Christ. But I remember him describing that when he studied at Juilliard, he would practise every day for twelve hours, for five years. He changed from a talented pianist, to a world-class pianist, through discipline. Some people speak of the 10 000 hour rule, from a study done by a Swedish psychologist, which suggests that it takes around 10 000 hours for someone to master a skill to near-perfection. To keep at something for 10 000 hours takes discipline. No discipline, no change.

Biblical change depends on three things. First, you need to know the importance of your choices. They are yours and nobody else's. The choices you make add up to the change you experience or the lack thereof.

Second, you need to have the right motive for your choices. Our duty to God and our delight in God are the two sides to making God-pleasing choices.

The third aspect is the aspect which goes missing. If you are going to make God-pleasing choices, you need discipline. You need to refuse evil choices, and choose biblical ones, in a sustained, repetitive manner, until your choices become habits. That's when you have truly changed.

We all understand the importance of our choices. We all agree that we should please God, and we should love God. But where we fall down, where change fails to happen is here. We do not apply this third aspect of Spirit-controlled discipline. So what happens is something like this. We try to make God-pleasing changes, and we succeed for a few tries, and then we either get tired, get frustrated, or give up the effort. What fails is the spiritual discipline.

Other times, we want a change in a certain direction, we want to begin a good spiritual habit, or break a sinful pattern of behaviour, but the effort to stop an old familiar way, and to begin a new, unfamiliar way, just seems exhausting and tiresome, so we don't begin. We fail us is not choice, or motive, but discipline.

We've said in this series the old saying goes: sow a thought, reap an act. Sow an act, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a character. Sow a character, reap a destiny. The problem many Christians

experience is that they do not sow consistently and steadily enough for anything to become a habit, so the change they long for is always in the future, always a wish.

If I were to ask you, which religion is known for its discipline, would Christianity leap into your mind? When you think of people you know who are disciplined in their approach to their faith, are those people born-again Christians? Too often not. Over fifty years ago, A.W. Tozer said, “ The amount of loafing practiced by the average Christian in spiritual things would ruin a concert pianist if he allowed himself to do the same thing in the field of music. The idle puttering around that we see in church circles would end the career of a big league pitcher in one week. No scientist could solve his exacting problem if he took as little interest in it as the rank and file of Christians take in the art of being holy. The nation whose soldiers were as soft and undisciplined as the soldiers of the churches would be conquered by the first enemy that attacked it. Triumphs are not won by men in easy chairs. Success is costly.”

Why are Christians not disciplined in their pursuit of spiritual growth and change? It is not because they have no discipline. Look at other areas of their lives, and you will see plenty of discipline. In their work lives you see them observe a rigorous schedule. They get up early, they work late, they work against deadlines, they plan their diaries carefully. They're disciplined. When Christians have to get a degree or finish a course, or complete a research project, they study long hours, they get up at all times, they burn the midnight oil. They're disciplined. When Christians are after good health, you'll see them in the gym, in the pool, on the treadmill. You'll see them researching diet and food, and spending hours finding the right place to buy the right foods at the right price. They're disciplined. When Christians want to save money, you'll see discipline. You'll see them budgeting monthly, and then going through their bank statements line by line at the end of the month. They're disciplined.

It is not that discipline is foreign to Christians. It is that our discipline is selective, and inconsistent. We apply rigorous discipline to many areas of our lives, but very often, not to our Christian growth. Why don't we? Why all this discipline in other areas, and a strange lack thereof in the things of God? I'll suggest three reasons.

First, we who believe in grace worry that we are somehow undermining grace or turning the Christian life into works if we apply too much effort, or if we apply sustained effort, or maybe if we get too detailed and specific in our efforts. We mistakenly think that focused, controlled, planned acts of obedience are lacking in dependence on God, and come from fleshly hearts. Well, what if planning and structuring and measuring your obedience, the way you already do with your finances, or your health, or your work, is actually called for by God? If God tells you to be disciplined, He is not going to turn around and accuse you of being fleshly when you do what He said. As we'll see in 1 Corinthians, being disciplined in our obedience is part of the obedience.

Second, we have a view that since our walk is a relationship, if we plan too carefully, and structure things, we are getting impersonal, and religious, and ritualistic. Relationships need to be spontaneous, we think, so since we are in a personal relationship with God, we don't want to get too mechanical. Fair enough. No woman would feel special if her date took out a stopwatch and began timing their first date. But on closer inspection, discipline and planning enters all our other relationships. Do couples plan their schedules? Do families plan specific times to be together? Do parents ever set goals for their children? Do families ever create routines, and structures? Of course we do. Relationships with no discipline dissolve into frustrating unpredictability. So being disciplined does not take away from being in a relationship with God.

Third, perhaps we skip discipline in this area of our lives because we have the automatic view of spiritual change. We reckon that if physical growth happens without too much effort from our side, then spiritual growth should really be the same. Pump in a few inputs – go to church, pray here and there, read a bit, and it should all come right by itself. But spiritual change is a lot more like learning a new habit than it is like growing your fingernails. Yes, it's good to keep up spiritual health by doing the essentials, but if you need specific change in a specific area, you have to work on it directly.

When we are seeking to change in an area in which we are battling, when you are seeking to establish a habit in your life that has never really taken, when you are seeking to break a bad habit, the process of change requires discipline. And that's where it counts. We don't need discipline for the areas that come naturally to us, or the areas we find enjoyment in. Discipline is required where something is hard, new to us, difficult, and feels unnatural. Sustained obedience.

You see, the good news is, in Christ, change is always possible. The bad news is, change is hard. To begin a new habit takes between three and six weeks of daily repetition. To break an old habit requires the same kind of sustained effort. The good news is, once you have applied discipline and the Holy Spirit has produced in you a holy habit, it will feel natural, and a lot easier than it does now. The bad news is, learning new ways of speaking, and thinking, and responding feels awkward, and clumsy, and difficult.

Think back to when you were learning something new, like when you first learned to ride a bicycle, or ice-skate, or drive a car. You had to think about everything, and it just seemed impossible. But through disciplined repetition, you can now, drive, navigate your way home, and talk to someone in the car.

Changing some of your oldest habits: being irritable with your family, envying other peoples cars or clothes, being critical with your mouth and mind, thinking lustful, polluted thoughts, feeling resentful at the thought of a particular person, procrastinating when it comes to prayer, these are going to take the kind of Spirit-dependent discipline that you need in every other area of your life. Beginning new habits: beginning the day with prayer, being generous with praise, making time for family, interceding for others, being patient in traffic, evangelising people you meet, these are going to take discipline.

If your Christian life is nothing more than doing all those things which at this time come naturally to you, then I can tell you with certainty, you are not changing, and you will not change. Who you are now will continue to direct what you do. In fact, the law of entropy means some of your good habits may start eroding.

So what we have here in 1 Corinthians 9 is Paul teaching us on spiritual discipline. He is not going to teach us what discipline is; we already know that from personal experience. He is going to show us what spiritual discipline does, how it manifests when used in the Christian life, when used to effect biblical change.

The image Paul uses is that of athletic contests, which were well known to his readers in Corinth. The Isthmian festival of Games was held just nine miles from Corinth every two years. It's hard to overstate how important these were to the Greeks. They would suspend all wars between Greek states for the time of the games. The laws regulating them were held as binding by the various independent states of Greece. The month in which they were held was called the sacred month. Huge crowds came from all over to view them. Winners would be received home with a triumphal

procession, with a new opening in the city wall broken open just for him, a chariot would carry him to the temple of that town's particular god. Welcoming songs were sung, poems were written about the athlete, and in some cases, the victor could be released from all further taxation. A statue of the athlete would often be raised in the city.

In our culture, sports are profoundly irreligious, but in Greek times, the athletic contests were deeply woven into their pagan religion. So Paul's Greek readers would have thought of those disciplined athletes who performed in service of their gods.

They would train for ten months under an appointed mentor, and follow a strict diet. At the beginning of the games, they would have to prove they were of pure Greek blood, had not forfeited their citizenship, and swear they had trained for ten months. Then they would begin the games, and compete in running, boxing, wrestling, chariot racing and horse racing. And their prize – a wreath made of pine leaves.

So with that image in mind, Paul wants his readers to know two truths about spiritual discipline.

I. Spiritual Discipline Moves to a Goal

24 Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. 25 And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. 26 Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. (1 Cor 9:24-26)

In the race, there can only be one winner. The reason for entering the contest is to win. You don't train, and you don't run, unless you plan to win. That's the goal. The goal energises the discipline.

In verse 26, Paul tells us that his spiritual race, his spiritual boxing match is not done aimlessly. He does not run without a finish line, and he does not jab and punch at nothing in particular. He is a man with purpose, with a goal.

Phi 3:14 *I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*

I have found in other areas of life, when you know what you have to accomplish, the disciplines take shape around the goal. A man knows he has to read 3000 pages to complete the course. He begins working out how long that will take him, and when he will do it. A woman decides she is going to lose 5 kilograms over three months. She begins to work out how much food she will take in, how much energy she will burn up at the gym, and how often and long her workouts will be. The goals drive and shape the disciplines.

Too often, Christians lack discipline because they are running rather aimlessly, they are shadowboxing. Without a goal of change, they are not thinking about what needs to stop, what needs to begin, when, and how often.

Here are two Christians, Tom and Ted. Tom and Ted both need change in the area of impatience. Here's how Tom goes about it. He prays, "Lord, please help me to be more patient." He tries to remember that he wants this change, but he typically only remembers at night, and feels guilty. Ted goes about it this way: He says, "I need to please God in the area of patience with my wife and children." He writes out ways that he knows his impatience comes out, and asks his wife and children to help him complete the list. He chooses three Scriptures on patience to memorise, and prints them, and puts them in some prominent places. He asks his wife to appropriately remind him

when he is showing the opposite, and tries to get in the habit of confessing and repenting when it happens. He finishes each day doing a check on how this particular habit is changing. He repeats this every day for four weeks. By God's grace, by the fourth week, he is finding what used to be knee-jerk impatient responses have been replaced by Spirit-empowered longsuffering. The difference: Tom's goal was vague, so it required no discipline. Ted's goal for change was specific, so it called for disciplines around it.

Or take Tina and Tracy. Both want to see change in the area of personal devotions. Tina's goal is "To be more consistent." Tina finds that for the first few days, she does a little better, but then finds it fizzles out. What kind of a goal is 'more consistent'? Once a month? Three times a month? Tracy does it this way: "By God's grace, I hope to have devotions five days out of seven for the next two months." Tracy tells her husband about her goal and asks him to help her. She sets her alarm clock. She uses some kind of devotional guide or Bible reading plan. She aims for a modest time of 15-20 minutes. She does her best to be as consistent with the time she goes to sleep as she does when she gets up. And when she fails, she confesses, and keeps going. What kind of change will Tracy see as opposed to Tina?

When it comes to those areas we know need specific change, we need specific goals. If the goal is done for God's glory, depending on God's Spirit, it is not fleshly or mechanical or impersonal to be specific. Aim at nothing, you'll hit it every time.

Beware the deceitfulness of your own heart. We are experts in setting goals for ourselves which can never really be broken, because they are too vague. My goal for change is to be a better Christian. This year, I aim to have more love. I want to grow in wisdom. I want to be used more by God. I pray for a better marriage this year.

Shadowboxing. Aimless running. You want change in your marriage, in your thought life, in your work life, in your emotions, in your devotional life, in your use of time, in your use of money, in your use of your body? Set a goal for change that is clear enough that you could know if you were failing.

Those athletes did it for a temporary reward. People who discipline themselves in health, in finances, in business, in education are also doing it for something temporal, earthly, transient. Change into the image of Christ is eternal. It accrues eternal rewards. What you do in this area of your life matters forever.

The second aspect of spiritual discipline is this:

II. Spiritual Discipline Masters Our Selves

And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things.

But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

Paul says that these athletes are temperate in all things. The word for *temperate* means power over self. These athletes would regulate their diet, and their sleep, and their exercise. They could not expect victory if they were disciplined in exercise, but self-indulgent in eating. They would master themselves in the process of training.

Paul then makes it personal. He says that he disciplines his own body and brings it into subjection.

These are very strong terms. Translated literally, it would read “I strike my body in the face, and enslave it.” Paul does not let his body's appetites, desires or needs control him. His goal controls him, and he makes his body fall in line with the goal.

He does not want to be disqualified, that is found to have been unsaved, or even if he is saved, to lose his rewards on the last day.

And in speaking of the body, I don't believe Paul is limiting the application here to the physical. It is the idea of mastering our very selves. Just like we are to present our bodies a living sacrifice to God, so here the idea is mastering ourselves – our bodies, our emotions, our thoughts.

Only, for a believer it is not self-control, it is Spirit-control. You are not disciplining yourself – you are allowing God's order to be enforced in your life thoroughly and continually. There is no way to gain mastery over self by self. That is a contradiction. You depend totally and obey diligently. That's why one of the fruits of the Spirit is temperance in Gal 5:23. Wouldst thou have thy flesh obey the spirit? Then let thy spirit obey thy God. Thou must be governed that thou mayest govern. —Augustine

Paul is really saying, I do not listen to myself, I command myself. I do not let my body's desires, or my feelings on a particular day, or my wandering thoughts set the agenda. Once I have this goal in mind, I know what needs to be done, I know what I need to put off, and I know what needs to be put on, and so my whole person falls in line with that.

Now notice, Paul did not say, I stroke my body, and coax into obeying. He did not say, I negotiate with my body and persuade it into subjection. He didn't say, I listen to my body, and dialogue it into subjection. The harsh language is there to tell us that there will be resistance. Your body, your emotions, your thoughts will fight against change.

Discipline is uphill: it is fighting against the tiredness that wants to check-out just when you know you need to apply yourself. It fights against the reluctance, the laziness, the fear, the distaste. When you have change in mind, you will know what that means in terms of habits, schedules, practices. You will know that your flesh will rebel against this. But just like you said no to yourself when you studied for those exams, just like you said no to yourself in pursuit of success at business, just like you said no to yourself for the sake of fitness or success in sport, if your goal is to please God, then you say no to yourself.

Without this kind of spiritual sweat, you will be defenceless against your flesh, against your feelings, against your thoughts. They will rule you, and they will overrule any change you might want to make. You will end up like Samson, a man with great ability, but who could never harness and control his appetites for the sake of godliness. You will end up like Esau, sacrificing the permanent on the altar of the immediate, giving up a birthright for the sake of a hungry stomach.

Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls. (Pro 25:28)

Pieces of land don't become farms by magic. They become that way by planning, structuring, organising, supervising, and correcting. Sowing and reaping to the Spirit is the same.

At some point in his life, Solomon was out, perhaps riding his chariot. He tells us about this in Proverbs 24. Suddenly a vineyard catches his eye. He diverts his course, brings his horses to a halt next to the stone wall. With a finger he pushes on a deep crack in it and sees the unmaintained wall lose a few more bits of clay. He props one leg up on it and looks over the vineyard. Growing

through the wall is a tall and healthy weed. He tugs at it and stares at the sight in front of him. Thorns, weeds, thistles. Instead of lines of trestles with vines hung, there are vines growing on the ground. Some have been choked out of life, and are just dead branches, but here and there some vines survive. But without the trestles, the pruning, the protection, there is little or no fruit. As Solomon looks, he is being taught by the owner of this field. The sluggard of the field is instructing Solomon without saying a word.

Solomon is no doubt thinking, "All this land, land which was purchased at a cost, land which could be bringing the owner the joy of its fruit, and money through the sale of it, instead lies here, being used for no other purpose. Sheer laziness, sheer slothfulness has brought about this state of affairs, and instead of fruitfulness, we have a sad and tragic waste"

Through a lack of discipline applied to the field of a life, the same result will occur. What could have been good fruit, through ill-discipline, no planning, and no mastering of self, our appetites grow like weeds, and the good fruit is stifled.

"I'd give anything to live a Christian life like Paul's." Paul has given you Gary Player's answer. "This is what it takes to live a Christian life like mine: set specific God-glorifying goals, and by the Spirit, subordinate yourself to achieving those."