

THE DISCIPLINED LIFE

Getting in shape to seek the Kingdom of God.

PART 1: THE OBJECT OF DISCIPLINE



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The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Object of Discipline

The Object of Discipline
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The Object of Discipline

Welcome to *The Object of Discipline*

Welcome to *The Object of Discipline*, part 1 of a 7-part series on the disciplined life. Seeking the Kingdom of God is full-time work, and we need to be in shape if we're going to make progress in this effort. Living a disciplined life is crucial to realizing more of the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom of God

The Object of Discipline introduces the idea of discipline and helps us to see that the focus of all discipline is on training our bodies for righteousness. This is a calling and challenge that extends to every area of our lives, as this series will make clear.

These studies are designed for individual or group use. While you may derive much benefit from studying on your own, that benefit can be greatly enhanced by joining with a friend or a group to read, discuss, share, challenge, and pray for one another.

Take one lesson at a time, reading the narrative and Scriptures, and pausing to reflect on and discuss the questions provided. Use the questions at the end of the study to summarize what you've learned and encourage one another in the goal of this study.

If you're in a group, make sure you prepare for each study by reading through the lesson in advance and answering the questions in writing. You might consider taking turns at leading your group. Let every member share in the privilege and responsibility of facilitating discussions. Group leaders should not feel like they have to "have all the answers." Their task is simply to lead the group through the readings and questions, and to help everyone participate.

These studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Faith, Works, and Discipline

But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified. 1 Corinthians 9.27

Not without works

It is the consistent teaching of the Scriptures that Christian faith is not genuine until it comes to expression in good works. Jesus taught this (Matt. 7.20), as did the apostles Paul (Eph. 2.10), James (Jms. 2.14-17), John (1 Jn. 2.1-6), Peter (2 Pet. 1.5-11), and the writer of the book of Hebrews (Heb. 6.11, 12; 10.24). Good works, works expressive of the resurrection life of Jesus, works across the board into every area of life, good works of love – these are the hallmark of all who have truly come to saving faith in Jesus Christ (Jn. 13.35).

Merely confessing with our words that we believe in Jesus and hope to go to heaven when we die – and perhaps confirming that by church attendance or other Christian activities – may indicate some true inward change, wrought by the Spirit of God (Gal. 4.1-6). But these may also indicate little more than outward conformity to familiar cultural practices or expectations – confessing Christ with our lips but, in reality, having hearts far from Him (Mk. 7.6, 7).

If all we have to point to as validation of our salvation is some testimony of belief coupled by such minimal cultural requirements as attendance at church, then we may have reason to doubt our own profession, whether it is genuine and sincere.

Thus Paul, seeing so many inconsistencies among the believers in Corinth, so little evidence of true and lively faith, challenged them to examine themselves: If there were no true works of obedience, holiness, and charity, then the “believers” there may well have been yet reprobate and without salvation (2 Cor. 13.5).

Practice, practice, practice

This is not to suggest for a moment that salvation is *through* good works; salvation is only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and *His* righteousness. But genuine faith, Paul and all the apostles insisted, is *unto good works*, which God has before ordained that we should walk in them (Eph. 2.8-10).

This being the case, it means that unless we *practice* our faith, by exercising the members of our bodies in specific acts of obedience, in every area of our lives, then we can have but slight assurance that we have *any* sincere faith in Christ at all. For faith must become visible through particular bodily acts – words spoken, kindnesses extended, help given, sacrifices endured, generosity expressed, and so forth. And our bodies, still to a large extent subject to the inward law of sin (Rom. 7.21-23), are by nature unable to comply with the demands of faith. If we are to manifest those good works which are the evidence that Christ has risen from the grave, we shall have to bring our bodies into subjection and qualify them for service to the Lord in every area of life.

It doesn't just happen

Hence, the need to *discipline* our bodies, each of the particular *members* of our bodies, so that they learn the ways of the Lord and, increasingly, allow the convictions of our hearts to come to consistent expression in lives of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

But this doesn't just happen. If the Apostle Paul had to “discipline” his body, working conscientiously and diligently to bring his bodily members into line with the demands of the Kingdom of God, then we may not expect anything other than this to be required of us as well. Disciplining our bodies, so that they are under the control of the indwelling Spirit of God, is a full-time calling for all who profess the Name of Jesus Christ.

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We may talk a good faith all we want, even, as Paul suggests, going so far as to preach it boldly and clearly. But unless our bodies are under the control of the Spirit, so that good works of love consistently issue from them, we will be disqualified – Paul’s word, not mine – from any true claim of saving faith.

Which makes careful, prayerful, ongoing, diligent work in disciplining our bodies a most important facet of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. A disciplined life is *full time work*, and fills *all the time of our lives* with words and deeds that bear witness to Jesus Christ.

Is this a task easily accomplished? Hardly. There is much to do, and a lifetime of hard work to engage, day after day after day. We shall have to apply ourselves diligently, in a comprehensive manner, and with the eyes of our soul focused squarely on the Lord and His objective, if we hope to realize the promise of good works in the practice of our confession of faith in Christ.

A life qualified to serve Christ is a life lived in subjection to His rule. And such a life is only achieved through discipline.

For reflection

1. For many people, the word, “discipline,” has a negative connotation. Given that discipline seems to be closely related to discipleship, this can be a little puzzling. Why do you suppose people can get a bad feeling for discipline?
2. What do we mean by “disciplining” the “members” of our bodies? What does that involve?
3. Can you think of some examples of the ways people discipline the members of their bodies in our society today?

Next steps – Conversation: How would you describe the disciplines that guide your life at this time? Are you certain they’re the ones you ought to be pursuing? Talk with a Christian friend about these questions.

2 A Whole-Body Workout

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. Romans 12.1

Get up on that altar!

Genuine Christian faith comes to expression in good works, which, by definition, must be wrought with our bodies. Beginning in our born-again souls – how we think and feel, our values and priorities – we must bring our bodies into submission, so that we may do those works of love which give evidence of the life of Christ in us.

Paul talks about this process in the language of sacrifice. He says that we are to give our bodies to the Lord as a kind of living sacrifice, so that we deny our own selfish interests and needs and devote our bodies to works which are pleasing to God and expressive of His saving presence in us. Paul says it is “reasonable” for us to do this because, after all, our bodies have become members with Christ; we have been bought with the price of Jesus’ blood, and we are not our own (1 Cor. 6.15, 20).

In 1 Corinthians 9.24-27 Paul likens this effort at bringing our bodies into submission to Jesus to that of an athlete, who disciplines his body so that it can perform according to the demands of his particular race. He says that accomplishing this discipline is “agonizing,” and that’s as true – indeed, more so – for the life of discipleship as it is for that of an athlete.

All our members

One of the reasons this is such a difficult undertaking is because it is comprehensive. It leaves nothing out – no member of your body, no relationship or role or responsibility, not a moment of time. As we practice what we believe, all the members of our bodies become engaged in the works of the Lord. The Scriptures urge us to train our eyes to see what they should, as they should (cf. Pss. 101.3; 119.37); to guard our ears against listening to false and sinful notions (Lk. 8.18); to tame our tongues for the purposes of godliness and edification (Jms. 3.1-12; Eph. 4.29); to dedicate our hands and feet to the service of the Lord (Zeph. 3.16; Heb. 12.12, 13); and to preserve the members of our bodies pure from every sinful involvement (1 Cor. 6.18-20). Paul writes in Romans 6 that, in order to do this, we must continually “put to death” every fleshly inclination of *all* the members of our bodies, and train them instead to seek and follow the path of righteousness at all times.

In practical terms, this means training the members of our body to employ their peculiar powers in the direction of Kingdom righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit. Whatever powers our bodily members engage – whether in relationships, work, culture, or community – those will be harnessed, directed, and improved for the glory of Christ to the extent we bring the members of our bodies into subjection to our Lord and King.

New skills, continuous effort

Further, this “agonizing” effort requires that we learn new skills in line with the virtues the Spirit of God is engendering in our souls. We who are prone to folly, selfishness, and indifference to others will need to learn what it means to show kindness or to extend a hand of generosity to a neighbor in need. We will have to train our eyes and ears to be alert to the concerns of others, so that we might serve them as Jesus would, and to direct our tongues in words of grace unto edification. When the writer of Hebrews exhorts us to “consider” how to stimulate one another to love and good works – to think about it in advance and to encourage one another accordingly (Heb. 10.24) – he offers good advice as well for how we must approach this challenge of disciplining our bodies for the practice of Christian faith.

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This will require determined and ongoing effort on our parts. Disciplining our bodies for righteousness is a full-time job. Each day we will need to seek the Lord – in prayer and in His Word – to help us discover new ways to employ the members of our bodies in the cause of righteousness. We'll have to think ahead to the people and situations we anticipate each day, and prepare our minds and hearts to direct the members of our bodies in good works of loving service to the people around us (Ps. 90.12, 16, 17).

Disciplining our bodies to live out our Christian faith is a daunting challenge, but one for which God has called and equipped us. His Word can guide us in every area of discipline (Ps. 119.105). His Spirit, dwelling in our souls, can make us willing and able to bring our bodies into submission to the love of Jesus (Phil. 2.12, 13). If we seek help earnestly from the Lord, God will fill us with His determination and strength, so that, in the power of Jesus we may discipline our bodies for His glory (Lk. 11.1-13; Eph. 5.15-21).

For reflection

1. Why is the idea of being a “living sacrifice” a good way of thinking about the work of disciplining our bodies for Kingdom living?
2. What are the greatest obstacles that can keep us from taking up this challenge of a lifetime of disciplining our bodies for discipleship? How can believers help one another to overcome these obstacles?
3. Why should we expect to have to “agonize” in disciplining the members of our bodies?

Next steps – Conversation: When someone says he doesn't “like discipline” all he's really saying is he prefers the disciplines he's already settled into in life. Everyone lives a disciplined life. It's not a question of whether, but of which. Share this idea with a few of your friends, and ask them to respond.

3 Keep the Goal in Sight

Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3.13, 14

Hang in there!

Like all discipline, that which we undergo to bring our bodies into submission to the Lord is hard work, “agonizing” work, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9.24-27. All that thinking ahead, praying and seeking the Lord, envisioning new behaviors and activities, and then actually trying them out in the everyday situations of our lives – that can become an exhausting undertaking.

But the alternative to agonizing to bring our bodies through discipline into subjection to Jesus Christ is *not* to set discipline aside as too hard. Rather, it is to embrace disciplines which are *too easy* and *too comfortable* to allow us to realize the full and abundant life of good works for which we have been redeemed. Everyone leads a disciplined life. Everyone has allowed his or her life to fall into routines and practices which are repeated day after day, and which, as they are repeated, make us the people we actually are. If we’re not doing those exceedingly abundant good works Jesus promised we would, it’s because the wrong disciplines are directing our lives.

But Paul says we must not grow weary with learning to do good works with the members of our bodies (Gal. 6.9). But we *will* grow weary with this daily calling and sacrifice if we look upon the disciplining of our bodily members as an end in itself. Training our eyes, ears, hands, feet, tongue, and everything else to practice the good works for which we have been saved is *not* an end in itself. It is rather the means to a much larger, and much more glorious end – being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3.12-18).

Glimpses of Jesus

It’s not entirely clear how Paul, who never met Jesus Christ, managed to have such a clear and compelling vision of the Savior and His glory. Certainly some of that came by direct revelation, for we know that the Lord appeared to Paul on various occasions. More likely, Paul’s understanding of Jesus in glory was derived from those glimpses of Christ exalted which are provided in the Old Testament, particularly, the Psalms. We know, for example, that Psalm 110 was important to Paul, since he built an argument from it in 1 Corinthians 15. There are many similar passages in the Psalms, as well as in other places in the Old Testament, and I don’t think it’s a stretch at all to believe that Paul cobbled these various passages together into an inspiring and focusing vision of King Jesus exalted in glory, and then took that vision as his own objective and destination in life.

The vision of Jesus, exalted in glory, and all that trails along with that – His Kingdom, Church, salvation, and all the rest – this was the vision that guided Paul’s agonizing work of bringing his body into submission to the Lord. He reveled in that vision, and he strove toward in every aspect and facet of his life.

This must be what Paul has in mind both in Philippians 3 and in 2 Corinthians 4.6. There he writes that, by contemplating the face of Jesus Christ, he was able to engage the glory of God, and thus to find transforming power and strength which enabled him to persevere in good works in the face of many different kinds of affliction (cf. 2 Cor. 4.17, 18).

The vision of Christ

What did Paul see of God’s glory in Jesus?

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Certainly he must have seen him seated at the right hand of God, surrounded by the adoring, cheering, worshiping hosts of heaven (cf. Pss. 110, 47). Within that setting, Paul must have contemplated the perfection of Christ's beauty and the majesty and power of His reign (Ps. 45). He would have seen in Jesus the complete package of divine holiness, goodness, and truth – righteousness in all its perfection – which he, through obedience to God's Law, strove to be clothed with in his own life (cf. Rom. 3.23-31; 7.12). Paul's vision of Christ must have dazzled with the brilliance of Revelation 1 and enthralled him with the loveliness and power of Psalm 45. And that vision of Christ strengthened Paul to agonize daily to know more of Christ in him, the hope of glory.

Vision motivates and directs discipline. The clearer and more compelling our vision, the more earnest, specific, and devoted we will be in taking up the disciplines necessary to realize our vision.

It's safe to say, I think, that the vision of Jesus exalted was more than a mere intellectual construct for the Apostle Paul. His meditations on the face of Jesus and the glory of God radiating from it fixed that image indelibly in his soul, making becoming more like Jesus a true and viable goal for Paul's work of disciplining His own body.

We can expect the same. Take Jesus – exalted in glory – as the goal of your discipline, and your discipline will be both sweeter and more fruitful, day by day.

For reflection

1. “But the alternative to agonizing to bring our bodies through discipline into subjection to Jesus Christ is *not* to set discipline aside as too hard. Rather, it is to embrace disciplines which are *too easy* and *too comfortable* to allow us to realize the full and abundant life of good works for which we have been redeemed.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
2. The vision of Christ must become the “screen-saver” of our souls. Explain.
3. “Vision motivates and directs discipline.” Why is this necessarily so? How does one's vision of life affect the ways he uses his body?

Next steps – Preparation: How would you describe your vision of Jesus at this time? Of what does it consist? How clear and compelling is it? Does your vision of Jesus Christ stay with you throughout the day? Talk with a Christian friend about these questions.

4 Repertoires of Discipleship

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. 1 Corinthians 9.25

Many kinds of behavior

Comparing the work of disciplining our bodies to what athletes do is most apt, as we have seen. We have to focus on the prize we are trying to achieve – increasing in Christ-likeness. We must direct our souls to know God and Jesus Christ, which is eternal life, and subject our bodies to the determination of our mind, heart, and will. We cannot ignore a single member of our bodies, for, as surely as we do, it will be our undoing down the homestretch. And we expect to have to work hard and long at this process, in order to make daily progress in doing the good works which demonstrate that we are true disciples of the Lord.

There is another way the athletics metaphor is appropriate for thinking about the discipline of our bodies. That has to do with the fact that all athletic competition breaks down into repertoires of behaviors which must be mastered, little by little, for each situation the athlete or team might encounter.

For example, when I played college football, our practice sessions were consistently given over to such routine activities as working on blocking, reading defenses and offenses, running plays, and so forth. The ball carriers and pass catchers had particular skills to master, as did those who played the line or on defense. Those skills, in turn, were reinforced and improved by certain exercises with weights and daily drills.

Football is a game of roles and disciplines appropriate to each role. By breaking down the game into manageable repertoires of behavior, coaches can see precisely where players need to improve, and players can work on specific skill sets, seeking consistent improvement across the board.

Sent like Jesus

Being a follower of Christ is rather like this. Jesus said, “As the Father has sent Me, so I am sending you” (Jn. 20.21). Jesus was sent to a particular time and place with a mission of bringing near the Kingdom of God. So also has He sent us. Our lives in this world are to be patterned after the example of Jesus, not only in the vision of His glory as we meditate on it day by day, but in the practical, down-to-earth details of how we live our lives – the disciplines that govern the ways we use our bodily members.

To follow Jesus like this, to discipline our bodies to do the kinds of good works He did, it will help if we can identify just a few roles and repertoires of discipleship which reflect the way Jesus lived, and which can provide us with more concrete objectives for our daily “agonizing” in the work of disciplining our bodies.

Discipleship roles and repertoires

This is actually easier than it sounds. Let me explain: We can identify *five specific roles* that Jesus consistently fulfilled during His earthly sojourn.

Jesus came in the role of a *seeker*. He sought the Lord, He sought always to do God’s will, and He sought the lost and those He called as disciples.

Second, Jesus came in the role of a *servant*. He reminded His disciples of this on several occasions, and modeled that role dramatically when He washed their feet.

In the third place, Jesus came as a *shepherd*, showing His disciples how to care for His flock so that it could be safe, well-fed, and strong.

He was obviously, as well, a *sower* of the Word of God wherever He went.

And, finally, Jesus was a good *steward* of His time, abilities, and calling from the Lord.

Fulfilling these roles entails mastering a repertoire of disciplines. We can identify five types of disciplines in particular: *spiritual* disciplines, for loving God and the health of our souls; *relational* disciplines, for showing love to our neighbors; *vocational* disciplines, to do the work appointed to us with excellence; *communal* disciplines, for working together with others in the Kingdom; and *provisional* disciplines, to aid us in times of trial and temptation. Each of these can be reduced to repeatable and improvable routines and protocols, which, taken together, help us to subdue the members of our bodies for obedience to Christ in every area of our lives.

These roles and repertoires are amenable to more precise definition and development, as we study the life of Christ and search the Scriptures for supporting or illustrative passages. By working hard at these disciplines, we can build up the necessary strength and skills – of mind, heart, conscience, and life – to enable us to fulfill our calling and do good works with our bodies.

For reflection

1. We have been sent into the world as Jesus was, with the same basic mission. How do you understand this mission, as it applies to your daily life?
2. T. M. mentions five different kinds of disciplines. On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 = “very clear”, how well do you understand what each of these disciplines entails as Kingdom-seeking protocols?
3. In which of these five kinds of disciplines do you need to gain more Biblical understanding?

Next steps – Transformation: Can you see these discipleship roles playing out in your life? In which of these do you most need to improve? For each discipleship role – seeker, servant, shepherd, sower, and steward – identify one thing you might do to improve. Share those with your spouse or a Christian friend.

5 The Time of Your Life

See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Ephesians 5:15, 16

Make the best use

Of course, everything we have been discussing in this study regarding the discipline of the body relates to how we use the time of our lives. We only speak with others, listen to their concerns, and lend our hands and bodies to serve them in the framework of time.

Thus it is important that, as Paul says, we learn to make the best use of our time. As followers of Jesus Christ, the phrase “best use” can only refer to advancing the rule of Christ – making disciples, building His Church, and making Him and His Kingdom known to the world. So with respect to the time of our lives, any use we make of that time must be consistent with our calling to follow Jesus and to use our bodies, in time, to serve His purposes and ends.

The importance of this is heightened when we understand time from a Biblical perspective. Each moment of time comes to us as a gift of God, of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who upholds all things and every moment of time. Our duty is to receive this gift and “improve” it, to use Edwards’ term, before it returns to the Lord from Whom it came.

A stewardship of time is thus demanded of us, a stewardship that can only be realized for a tenfold return when we discipline our bodies in the time of our lives.

How can we become better stewards of the time of our lives? Embedded in Paul’s exhortation are three guidelines for using our time with disciplined bodies to follow Jesus.

Three guidelines

First, we must *pay careful attention* to how we use our time. The New King James Version puts this well: “walk circumspectly.” Keep an eye on the horizons of your time. Don’t do things in a mindless or merely reactive manner.

As followers of Christ we have a purpose in life; we shouldn’t rattle around in the time of our lives like pin balls, bouncing uncontrollably from one situation or circumstance to the next. Rather, we should learn to plan our time wisely, numbering the hours and days of our lives in advance, so that we can prepare to use them wisely (Ps. 90:12). And it wouldn’t hurt to have some method in place for evaluating your time, from time to time, even if that consists of nothing more than an end-of-the-day review of your activities, waiting on the Lord in prayer to show you how you might improve your time usage tomorrow.

Second, Paul insists that we must *use our time like wise people*, not like fools. The fool says in his heart that there is no God (Ps. 14:3). In the life of an unbelieving person, what this means is that God, if He exists at all, has no interest or place in the time of his life. The unbeliever is the master of his fate; he is the captain of his soul. What could God possibly add of significance to the time of his life?

But the believer must not live this way; rather, he trusts in the Lord with all his heart; in *all our ways* we don’t want to depend merely on our best thoughts or what others do or say or approve. We want to trust in the Lord and look to Him for guidance in all our ways, all the time of our lives (Prov. 3:5, 6). This will require that we pay careful attention to the Scriptures as we read them, listening for the Spirit as He speaks into all the nooks and crannies of our lives, allowing God’s Word to shine its light into the activities, relationships,

roles, and responsibilities of our everyday lives, so that we might have God's wisdom in how to discipline and prepare our bodies to make the best use of our time.

Finally, Paul suggests that we *keep the larger spiritual perspective in view* at all times. The days are evil, Paul tells us. Spiritual forces of wickedness in high places are deceiving and misleading many people. They will latch on to anything to advance their pernicious objectives, even things we might mindlessly do or say. Every moment of our time that our bodies waste in non-Kingdom endeavors will be captured by the enemy of our souls and used for his ends.

We must be vigilant daily, consecrating all our bodily members to the work of the Lord, and beseeching His guarding and guiding presence in all the time of our lives. The more aware we are of our time, and purposeful in how we must use it, the greater will be the likelihood that we will serve Christ with our bodies in the time of our lives.

For reflection

1. What are the implications of time being a gift of God?
2. What do you think are some of the keys to “making the most” of or “redeeming” the time of our lives?
3. What does T. M. mean by “the larger spiritual perspective”? Why is it important to keep this in mind? How can we do this?

Next steps – Preparation: Are you confident that all the time of your life is being used as fully as possible for the Kingdom of God? Do you plan well and review frequently? Is your body rightly disciplined to make the most of all the time of your life? Keep track of your time in 30-minute segments for a day. What do you learn from this exercise?

6 Spiritual Fuel for Physical Works

But reject profane and old wives' fables, and exercise yourself toward godliness. For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come. 1 Timothy 4.7, 8

First, resolve!

We have been urging the point in this series that discipleship is a physical thing; it necessarily involves the members of our bodies in carrying out the good works to which we are called as followers of Jesus Christ.

But living this way doesn't come naturally to us, and the mere passage of time in the faith will not bring it to fruition, either. Rather, we have to attack this calling like an athlete, agonizing against the natural, sinful tendencies of our bodily members in order to make them obey the determinations of our souls. When our minds are made up to follow Jesus, our hearts are devoted to Him in love, and our consciences have established seeking His Kingdom and righteousness as our first priorities, disciplining our bodies will be an exciting, enjoyable, and fruitful undertaking.

But this is precisely the challenge. First, we have to make up our minds that this is the disciplined life we intend to pursue. I'm reminded of an old Steve Martin routine concerning how to be a millionaire. First, Martin advises, get a million dollars. Everything is easier after that. Disciplining our bodies for discipleship will follow once we have resolved in our souls that following Christ and serving Him are going to be the order of the day in all the activities of our lives.

But that resolve must be firmly lodged in our souls, in all the cylinders of this spiritual engine of life. Then, once in place, that resolve must be daily revisited and reinforced.

It starts in the soul

Put another way, we might say that the *physical power* by which our bodies become employed in serving Jesus Christ is generated by the *spiritual fuel* that we faithfully stoke into the engine of our soul. In fact, this is not unlike the way God Himself, a most pure Spirit, rules the physical cosmos (Heb. 1.3). We will not be able to fulfill our calling for true words and good works with our bodies if our approach to the care and feeding of our souls is merely casual or cavalier.

In the repertoire of Kingdom disciplines, therefore, spiritual disciplines, are foundational to all other disciplines. Without a good regimen of spiritual disciplines, daily and faithfully pursued, we're likely to fall short of what we need to make our bodies serve Jesus in all our relationships, roles, and responsibilities, and amid the hard knocks and disappointments of life.

I don't want us to take this for granted. You will not think about serving Christ with your body unless your *mind* is exercised and trained to focus on spiritual matters above all else. You won't be inclined to serve others in love with your tongue or hands unless your *heart* is being daily steeped in the love of Jesus Christ. And you will doubtless fritter away many opportunities to make the most of your time unless, in your *conscience*, you have resolved and determined that the first priority in all the moments of your life is to serve Christ and glorify God.

From these powerful spiritual cylinders, well-tuned and richly fueled, the engine of our soul generates the good works our bodies carry out in every area of life.

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Keeping the soul fine-tuned

So we must keep this engine fine-tuned and running on the high-octane fuel of regular spiritual disciplines. Your Christian life will be disappointing, unreal, and unfruitful unless you daily attend to the care and feeding of your soul.

This means daily time in God's Word, reading, meditating, journaling, and seeking out applications for your daily life.

It will also require prayer – more prayer, earnest prayer, that goes with you throughout the day and keeps you focused on your high calling in the Lord.

Regular worship of God will also help to keep that perspective in focus. And other disciplines, such as fasting, singing, and solitude, can also help in making sure that the good works you desire to fulfill will have the spiritual power necessary to drive them forward when push comes to shove in the opportunities of your everyday life.

Spiritual disciplines are the starting-point for disciplining our bodies to follow Jesus.

For reflection

1. What are “spiritual disciplines”? Why do we refer to them as “spiritual”? Should these be optional for Christians?
2. What do we mean by saying that we need *spiritual* power to exert the *physical* power of good works in every area of our lives? How can we fine-tune our spiritual disciplines to help ensure they will supply the power we need when we need it?
3. Spiritual disciplines must be foundational to all other disciplines – relational, vocational, communal, and provisional. Why? Can you give an example of how this should work? How, for example, do our spiritual disciplines prepare us for success in our relational disciplines? Or our vocational disciplines?

Next Steps – Conversation: How would you describe the state of your spiritual disciplines at this time? Can you see any areas where improvement is needed? Talk with your spouse or a Christian friend about these questions.

7 Someone to Watch over You

And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works... Hebrews 10:24

A team effort

The Scriptures are clear that following Jesus Christ requires a team effort. Like athletics or most vocations, we all work better, we all improve and practice our disciplines more consistently, when we're working as part of a team. The many "one another" passages of the New Testament make this abundantly clear: love one another, bear one another's burdens, pray for one another, teach and admonish one another, encourage one another, and so forth.

Simply put, *discipleship* requires *companionship* in the Lord. We need other believers to help us along the way in following Jesus, and this pertains to the disciplining of our bodies as well. We all need people in our lives to help us specifically with this high calling of bringing the members of our bodies into submission to Christ, so that we can do the good works for which He has redeemed us.

We all need such people in our lives, people who know what we're working on, what we're struggling with, and what opportunities for using our bodies daily arise, and who will celebrate God's victories in and through us as we are used of the Lord in His service. These are true friends, soul friends, not simply because we enjoy their presence or find them interesting or funny, but because they want us to succeed as followers of Christ. We know they will pray for us, encourage us, share their own triumphs and struggles with us, and help us, however they may, to become true and consistent servants of the Lord.

Making relationships work

How do such relationships work?

Of course, they require time spent together getting to know one another and sharing freely and honestly about our struggles and aspirations. Soul friends work hard to understand one another. They listen well and help one another think through their challenges, needs, hopes, and concerns. Soul friends will walk together in a common path of growth by reading books or studying Scripture together. Regular prayer together and for one another will also be an aspect of such a relationship.

It can also be helpful in disciplining your body for soul friends to pursue some ministry activity together – leading a Bible study, reaching out to lost friends or colleagues, or serving in some capacity at your church. In and through all the different aspects of their relationship, soul friends must invite and encourage free and open conversation about the Lord and His Kingdom.

Where to look

Celtic Christians are rightly appreciated for their widespread and faithful use of the discipline of *anam cara*, or, the soul friend. St. Brigid, an early 6th century Celtic leader, believed that everybody should have at least one such friend in his life. She said that "a man without a soul friend is like a body without a head."

Our work at disciplining our bodies to serve Christ by true words and good works will proceed much more effectively if we have some friends who know what we're seeking, share with us in the struggle, support us by their prayers and encouragement, and provide an example to whom we can look in our walk with the Lord.

So, where can we find a person to be such a soul friend?

If you're married, your spouse is the place to start. Focusing together on your walk with and work for the

Lord Jesus can provide a strong bond and foundation for building a lasting, loving marriage.

Beyond that, you might need another person or two of the same sex as you to help you fulfill this high and holy calling. Look for someone with similar interests, someone who is as serious as you are about disciplining your body for good works. Make sure your prospective soul friend understands the commitment of time and devotion that will be required, and agree on some working protocol for growing in your relationship together.

Just make sure that you keep your soul relationships above reproach and beyond suspicion. You don't want your good works to be looked at or talked about by others as potentially a context for evil. It's best, therefore, that such relationships involve men with men and women with women.

Get a soul friend – someone to watch over you in the Lord's Name – and discover how such a relationship can improve and enliven your effort to discipline your body for serving Christ.

For reflection

1. What could a "soul friend" do for you to help you in disciplining your body for life in the Kingdom of God?
2. Having a soul friend bridges the connection between spiritual and relational disciplines. Soul friends help us to grow spiritually, and they provide a context for working on the disciplines of neighbor love. What would being a soul friend require of you?
3. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study? How are you planning to incorporate that lesson into your walk with and work for the Lord?

Next steps – Transformation: Do you have a soul friend? Would you be willing to be a soul friend to another believer? Share the soul friend idea with a few friends, and try to identify at least one of them for an ongoing soul-friendship.

Questions for Review and Discussion

1. Leading a disciplined life addresses the question of how we use our bodies in time. What can we expect of our bodies if we are not consciously disciplining them to make the most of the time God entrusts to us? Why do we insist that we must focus the agonizing work of discipline on *all* the members of our body?
2. In what ways is leading a disciplined life like being an athlete? Or a concert pianist? What do we say that becoming disciplined is *agonizing*?
3. In which of the discipleship roles – seeker, servant, shepherd, sower, steward – do you most need to see improvement? Explain.
4. This study mentioned five kinds of disciplines that can help us in making sure that we are making the best use of our bodies in the time God allots to us each day. Is it asking too much of people to encourage them to think this way, and to bring their bodies into subjection like this? Explain.
5. What is the goal of a disciplined life? How can we keep that goal in mind at all times? What might be some helpful ways for checking our progress toward that goal?

Additional thoughts, comments, questions, or items for prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the donate button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.