

Spiritual Gymnastics-Good Conditioning

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments" Volume #19, Nu 31 August 1, 2004GG

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. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptation. 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. These things command and teach. {1Ti 4:8-11}

Exercise in this lesson comes from a Greek word that referred to Olympic athletes in training. It was common for these men to strip naked so as to prevent any hindrance from clothing as they competed for the prize. Paul uses this analogy to prompt parallel thoughts in our minds regarding the spiritual exercises necessary to grow into mature, well-conditioned Christians. Indeed the exercise of spiritual senses is vital to spiritual maturity, but we must not overlook the analogy. As the ancient athlete stripped himself of all clothing, the authentic Christian who is committed to growing in spiritual maturity must get rid of all the facades and pretenses that people frequently use to cover up their humanity, their little flaws in conduct or character. You can't imagine the times that I've talked with people whom I knew fairly well about difficulties in their life, only to hear the empty denials. "Oh no, there is no problem at all. Everything is fine." Eventually in a stable church where relationships form and grow over many years, it is next to impossible for the truth to remain unknown. Sooner or later, it surfaces. The pride and pretense that people use to cover up their personal flaws or difficulties reveals a deeper spiritual problem. Excessive pride Paul uses in his list of ministerial qualifications to characterize a novice in the faith, someone who is young and inexperienced. Whether in the pulpit or the pew, the indicators are reliable. When a person works to maintain a false pretense of near-perfection, they reveal deep-seated spiritual immaturity that will likely prevent them from ever rising to the stature of mature other-centered Christian service.

We respond with refreshing approval at the news of John Newton never allowing his hearers to forget his days as a black-hearted slave-trader. Yet we refuse to practice the same authentic openness with believers in our own personal world. The same person who often works to cover up personal weakness or flaws will quickly appear in the judgment seat when opportunity appears to criticize or judge faults in other people. If we follow Paul's analogy of the Olympic athlete, we might equate this conduct to the athlete who constantly rejects the appropriate diet and consumes large quantities of high-sugar, low protein foods, gains weight, shirks training, and shows up at the actual competition overweight and out of shape.

Godliness, authentic godliness, enriches one's life beyond anything that we could imagine, short of the actual experience of blessings bestowed. Paul emphasizes this point, "...having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come." He does not step out of his character and advocate salvation by works in this verse. "Promise" comes from a Greek word that means "agreement, consent, approval" (Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains). Paul's point seems more to indicate evidence or assurance than merit. A person may well be saved without giving external evidence that we can see, but they will not enjoy the prospect or assurance of their salvation apart from demonstrable fruit in their life. Their conduct must "agree" with their spiritual state for them to enjoy the assurance of their blessed state.

Do not overlook the point that Paul makes. Not only does spiritual exercise in godliness communicate the assurance of our final salvation, it also enriches the life that "now is."

"For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God." Trust in yourself and men will applaud your ingenuity and celebrate your success. Trust in God and keep Him

prominent in your life as the source of blessing and success, and the approving smiles will fade quickly. No less now than then, demonstrate authentic trust in God and you will face reproach. However, the same factor that brought reproach on Paul was the reason for his labor. Trusting God is not always easy or natural for us, is it? Several months ago I was talking with a mature Christian friend about some fairly significant difficulties that both he and I were facing in our separate lives. We concluded that, though we did not believe that God caused our difficulties, we were confident that He was with us and would bring good to us out of these problems. One of us echoed a thoughtful after-thought. "If we trust God so fully, why do we wake up in the middle of the night with this problem on our minds? Why does it hinder our peaceful sleep?" We both heartily agreed. Trusting God in the midst of trials requires an incredible investment of effort, a true act of the will, not of the emotions.

God is consistently good to all in His creation. Even the wicked who will spend eternity under the just sentence of their sins must acknowledge God's incredible goodness bestowed upon them as His natural creatures, "...who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe." God sends rain and beautiful seasons on the just and the unjust. He blesses both with families, with jobs, and with many other natural favors. However, Paul will not allow us to forget that we enjoy a special blessing in our spiritual state as God's children. We receive freely and without merit from His loving hand not only our salvation, but "all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ". {Eph 1:3} We enjoy rich blessings now and look forward-with rightful grounds-to the full expression of our salvation in the world to come. Many commentators define the words used in Heb 11:1 referring to faith as "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" as the "title deed to our spiritual property." Faith is not our full and final possession, but it serves as the equivalent of a title deed to that possession. It doesn't pay the price of that possession, a common fault in the teaching of many Christians today who emphasize our faith more than Christ's death in our salvation. But we can pick up our faith, look at it, and experience its profound influence and as it were look at the legal document that ensures our eventual and full possession of our property, our eternity in heaven with God.

Pause for a moment and consider the setting of this letter. Paul becomes aware of a growing problem, of all places, in the beloved Ephesian church. He sends Timothy to work with the church to resolve the problem and regain their spiritual equilibrium. The simple practice of these godly traits and disciplines will make the difference in the Ephesian church-as in our own churches-between survival and demise, between blessing and spiritual drought. For Paul, the belief in and practice of these things is not an option. It is a necessity.

"These things command and teach." We find no hint at a mere suggestion or optional recommendation for the few who truly take their faith seriously. "Command" sets the stage with full clarity. The issues that Paul surfaces in this letter are not Paul's private, personal opinion. They are not simply what Paul thinks the Ephesian church should do. They are to be delivered to the church with the gravity of the Ten Commandments. Can we ignore or forget our Lord's sobering words, "If ye love me, keep my commandments". {Joh 14:15} It also nudges us to the parallel of that verse, "If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love". {Joh 15:10} As Paul clearly developed in 1Co 13, loving God is not a matter of emotion, but of will. We do not emote love for God, though His active love in our conduct will no doubt impact our emotions. Loving God in the Biblical sense involves obedience, an act of the will, a committed decision to act out our love to Him in our conduct. How did Jesus demonstrate love for the Father? He kept the Father's commandments.

A treasure of the gospel appears in this simple sentence. Not only does the gospel contain certain "commandments," it also "teaches" believers how to develop those habits. It sets the goal of our conduct and then empowers us to reach the goal. We do not gain our spiritual objectives by harder work or by more stubborn determination. These efforts guarantee failure, not success. Here Paul's earlier

comment shines. We work -we labor -to trust in the living God. We trust him with our will, with our conduct, and with significant effort. The results in our lives and in the lives of those who are touched by our example will demonstrate the blessing. Are we ready?

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