

THE SELF-DISCIPLINED CHRISTIAN

It's not only easy to see how the word "discipline" is an off-shoot from the word "disciple" by the similarity in the appearance of the two terms, but it's also easy to see this by defining the term "discipline."

According to Webster's 1993 Collegiate Dictionary, "discipline" as a noun is "[... fr. L disciplina teaching, learning, fr. Disciplulus pupil] 1: PUNISHMENT 2 obs: INSTRUCTION ... 4: training that corrects, molds, or perfects the mental faculties or moral character 5 a: control gained by enforcing obedience or order b: orderly or prescribed conduct or pattern of behavior c: SELF-CONTROL...."

Further, Webster says that "discipline" as a verb is "1: to punish or penalize for the sake of discipline 2: to train or develop by instruction and exercise esp. in self-control 3 a: to bring ... under control b: to impose order upon ... syn see PUNISH, TEACH."

We may illustrate discipline like this: The disciplined person picks up his clothes; the undisciplined person lets them lie. One plans his work and works his plan; the other works haphazardly. One is habitually prompt; the other is notoriously late.

"DISCIPLES" OF CHRIST [CHRISTIANS] MUST BE A DISCIPLINED [SELF-DISCIPLINED] PEOPLE!

WE MUST BE SELF-DISCIPLINED FOR HEALTH REASONS.

According to Paul, we are stewards of our bodies: "Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's" (First Corinthians 6:19-20).

Without self-discipline, our bodies and minds can easily be destroyed. Many emotional and nervous disorders are caused by a lack of self-discipline. People with these problems show this to be true by blaming others, self-inducing illness, withdrawing from society, and displaying "nerve" problems. These people may read books, talk to doctors and preachers, say many prayers, and make many religious commitments. They may be given drugs, advice, costly treatment, and spiritual scourgings, but all these things fail to reveal and remedy the real cause: a lack of self-discipline.

Tobacco users destroy God's body. I don't know about right now, but in 1987, the leading cancer killer in women was lung cancer, surpassing breast cancer, which for more than 50 years was the number one killer of women. This reflected the rising number of women who had yielded to smoking, and cigarette smoking contributes to lung cancer in 83% of cases. Likewise, much mouth cancer is contributed to by chewing tobacco. Some reasons to quit using tobacco are...

~ to improve the health of God's body (First Corinthians 6:19-20),

~ to set a good Christian example (I just can't see Jesus smoking),

~ to avoid annoying and hurting the bodies of people around us (Matthew 22:39, 7:12, and First Peter 3:8),

~ to give up a bad habit (Second Corinthians 7:1 and First Corinthians 6:12), and...

~ to save money (Luke 16:1-10)

I once knew a family of six which was trying in the early 1980s to live off \$800 a month; yet, because four of them smoked, they spent at least \$100 a month just on cigarettes (yes, a long time ago!). Are we supposed to have pity on poor people who spend money on such habits? Are we as the church supposed to help poor members who always seem to find the resources for cigarettes? Surely not!

Igor Gorin, a famous Ukrainian-American baritone, said that his professor told him, "Igor, you will have to be a great singer or a great pipe smoker. You cannot do both." So the pipe went!

WE MUST BE SELF-DISCIPLINED IN THE AREA OF SUBORDINATION TO AUTHORITY.

Habitual rebellion is the cult of weaklings rather than the strong. It requires neither intelligence nor character to loudly say, "No one can tell me what to do!" But it takes both to submit to authority. We should submit graciously, not grudgingly, with mature understanding and cheerful good will.

After referring to "submitting ourselves to one another," Paul gave a specific example of such by writing, "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as also Christ is the head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything" (Ephesians 5:21-24). He also gave a general rule which would include our giving of this submission: "God loves a cheerful giver."

WE MUST BE SELF-DISCIPLINED IN THE AREA OF MOODINESS.

A disciplined character never wastes time and energy by catering to moodiness: "I don't feel like it" may sometimes be true, but the habitual use of that excuse is the trait of the weakling. When a college student said he had not attended the class because he "didn't feel like it," the professor said, "Young man, has it ever occurred to you that most of the world's work is done by people who 'don't feel like it'?"

Paul wrote Timothy saying, "Be ready in season and out of season" (Second Timothy 4:2a).

WE MUST BE SELF-DISCIPLINED IN THE AREA OF STUDY.

It's reported that when a student said to Sir Winston Churchill that he couldn't write unless the "mood" came to him, the great statesman said, "NO! Shut yourself in your study from nine till one and make yourself write. Prod yourself! Kick yourself! It's the only way!"

Acts 17:11 tells us that the Bereans "were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they ... searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so." I don't imagine they "felt" like checking up on Paul every day like that, especially since it's improbable that each of them had their own copy of the Scriptures; it took more work on their part than it does on ours.

WE MUST BE SELF-DISCIPLINED IN MIND AND BODY.

We must discipline or train our minds and bodies to do God's Will. Galatians 5:16-18 read, "I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law." Verses 24-25 read, "And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit."

In the battle of ideas, the disciplined mind has the advantage over the undisciplined mind. A trained mind can evaluate evidence and understand arguments (unlike some debaters I've heard). The trained mind can think logically, select ends, and devise means; it can concentrate on essentials and discard the irrelevant; it can think more rapidly and also more accurately.

The disciplined body can be a great asset to help the mind obtain goals. Thomas Edison's ability to sleep and awaken at will and to work through grueling, unbroken stretches, undoubtedly contributed to his greatness as an inventor. Fritz Kreisler was forced by an accident to lay aside his violin for many weeks. When he finally tuned his instrument, his fingers were so stiff that playing seemed impossible. "But my desire was so intense," he said, "that I told myself, 'These fingers are mine. These are my slaves. I am the general. I order them to play and I will them to action.' You know," he said, "they played!"

Solomon likewise said, "If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small" (Proverbs 24:10). And Paul wrote, "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. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified" (First Corinthians 9:26-27).

HOW DO WE DISCIPLINE OURSELVES? Make up our minds to not look back at failure to have an excuse for discouragement! Jesus said, "No one having put his hand to the plow and looking back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62). Paul said, "This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead" (Philippians 3:13). Here are a few specifics we can work on.

We need to be punctual. Tardiness is a bad habit which needs to be broken and which anyone, alert to life's obligations, can break. When students excuse their tardiness by the cliché, "Better late than never," professor Mae Brown of CA would state, "Better never late!" Then she would add, "Trifles make perfection, yet perfection is no trifle." Besides, being punctual is a Christian courtesy: Peter said, "Be courteous" (First Peter 3:8). Paul said that we shouldn't lag in our diligence (Romans 12:11).

We need to learn to be patient; it may be God's providence working. There was once a "Christian" worker in England during the war who felt it imperative to catch a certain bus but missed it due to delays beyond his control. He was very tempted to fret while waiting for the next one until the bus he did end up taking overtook the one he missed ... now twisted and battered by a fallen bomb, its passengers all corpses. Romans 8:28 says, "God works all things together for good to those who love Him."

We need to learn to respect time tags. Many of life's most important joys, privileges, and responsibilities have time tags on them. Commenting on the failure of so many couples to wait for marriage to consummate their love, Dr. Dwight Small said, "Too many young people are nothing but spoiled children who must have immediate satisfaction of all their urges"; he called this an "immature attitude." But how did they get that way? By being allowed to eat as children when they chose instead of being required to wait for mealtime; by being permitted to "jump the gun" in opening their birthday presents early; by being permitted to drive before they were legally eligible to do so. So life became a pattern of cheating the calendar, of taking privileges and pleasures before they were entitled to them. (See Ecclesiastes 3:1-8.)

We need to piece our minds together. Paul said it this way, "Take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (Second Corinthians 10:5). This passage reminds me of people who seem to enjoy their custom of speaking their minds; they may say, "I'm sorry, but I just speak my mind, and people need to learn to live with it." No, actually, we really don't need to learn to live with it; rather, if we have that disposition, we need to discipline ourselves not to speak our minds and not to say "I'm sorry" for it when we really aren't.

Again Paul said we ought to place every thought, the source of every word we speak, subject to Christ. We need to gather up our minds, organize the loose ends, draw into service our wandering thoughts, just as an Oriental in Peter's day would quickly gather up his loose robe with a girdle when in a hurry or starting on a journey: this is what Peter had in mind when he said, "Gird up the loins of your mind" (First Peter 1:13). A. T. Robertson said that the word "mind" here refers to the "faculty of seeing through a thing"; in other words, it refers to a mind that can "understand arguments" when presented. We're so accustomed to seeing everything in pictures and in written form that on our own our minds tend to flop like jelly or skip here and there, so we need to get somewhere alone sometimes (without helps, pictures, and books) when we come across our next problem and think, think, think! We desperately need to exercise our minds!

Someone once said, "One man is made up of many men." Why? Because he gets all his information from them instead of using his own brain; we have a bad tendency to do this in studying by using our commentaries, for example, before using our own minds and other preliminary books such as

dictionaries. We must think till all the muddiness is gone; we'll remember better this way. After working at this and organizing our thoughts, we will then begin to "see through a thing." After enumerating some virtues, Paul said to "think (meditate) on these things" (Philippians 4:8).

We need to cultivate an attitude of sincere gratitude for correction. For example, we should thank the person who points out a grammatical error, for he's handing us a piece of material for the disciplined character we should be building. Grammatical errors look bad on a writer or speaker: it makes him look ignorant and causes people to think he doesn't know what he's talking about. A magazine cartoon once showed a young secretary on the floor in a tantrum, tears flowing and fists pounding. Her middle-aged boss looked at her and said, "Miss Davis, you must learn to take correction!" Proverbs 15:32 reads, "He who disdains instruction despises his own soul; but he who heeds reproof gets understanding." We need to cultivate a sense of responsibility—welcome and bear our yokes. Lamentations 3:27 reads, "It is good for a man to bear the yoke of his youth." Galatians 6:5 reads, "Each one shall bear his own load."

We need to have a systematic prayer life, for this is a great discipline as well. Daniel 6:10 tells us that it was Daniel's habit to pray three times a day. Likewise, Psalm 55:16-17 tells us that it was David's habit to pray every evening, morning, and midday.

CONCLUSION

Here's the result of an undisciplined life as seen in the eyes of Theodore Roosevelt: "Things which will destroy America are prosperity at any price, peace at any price, safety first instead of duty first, the love of soft living, and the get rich theory of life." (Perhaps he should have said that in the present tense.) Conversely, here are some results of the disciplined person...

~ He has poise and grace.

~ He doesn't panic or indulge in self-pity: he rises courageously, even heroically, to meet life and conquer it.

~ He resolves to face his duty: he is governed by a sense of responsibility.

~ He brings adversity under tribute and compels it to serve him: when he cannot repel adversity, he bows to it, but is not broken by it.

The disciplined character belongs to the person who achieves balance by bringing all his faculties under control: these are order, consistency, and purpose in life. Second Peter 1:5-11 reads, Give "all diligence" and "add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." So since we are free moral agents, we must discipline ourselves!

[Tony E. Denton. March 1987; AsiteForTheLord.com]