

Disciplining Ourselves

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1 Corinthians 9:24-27 — Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I discipline my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

I'm guessing we can all agree that self-discipline is a good thing. We all recognize that we have weaknesses, wayward desires, limited willpower. We've got good intentions and admirable ambitions, to be sure, but we often get side-tracked, or run out of steam, or just can't seem to follow through. And so, we acknowledge our need for self-discipline: the virtue by which we control our wayward desires, so that we can buckle down and get moving, with our minds, bodies, and spirits motivated to reach for a greater good, when it would be easier to just settle in and let it be.

So, we're all on the same page here: two thumbs way up for self-discipline. And yet, I'm guessing we can also agree that self-discipline can become a bad thing. Any virtue taken too far or taken in the wrong direction can become a vice. We humans are more than capable of taking something that's meant to help us and twisting it in such a way that it actually hurts us. Self-discipline turns dangerous, for example, when we are so focused on achieving a particular goal that we neglect other duties or other gifts in our lives. Think of the workaholic who strenuously labors to become a stellar employee—but in the process becomes a lousy parent or spouse or friend. We know that we need self-discipline, but we also know that we need to keep it in check. So, the question for us this morning is this: How do we discipline ourselves in ways that help us, not hurt us? What principles can guide us as we seek, in Paul's words, to run the race well—without injuring ourselves or running other people down? I want to offer two warnings and then one recommendation.

First, beware of self-discipline for the sake of control. In other words, try not to discipline yourself because you're desperate to keep things just the way you want them to be, or the way you believe things should be. Too often, we walk through life with clenched fists, afraid of anything getting out of hand, believing that if we just grit our teeth and tighten our grip, all will go as we hope it will go. This kind of self-discipline is really just self-deception. Try as we might, we simply cannot keep *all* of our ducks in a row *all* of the time, because life has a way of shaking things up. Life has a way of prying open our hands. What's more, this can be a good thing: when we walk through life with clenched fists, it's not only hard for things to get *out*; it's also hard for things to get *in*. If we're going to receive new gifts from God, then we're going to have to keep our hands open. Now, of course, we're allowed to hold onto things, it's *good* to hold

onto things—but in a world where we will inevitably be surprised both by grief and by grace, we do well to hold things loosely.

It's tough. Believe me, I know what it's like to crave control. When a crisis in your life cracks your fists open, it's easy to start grasping at the air. When I was a freshman in college, living in Chicago, away from my family in Texas, I learned that there had been longstanding infidelity in my family. This news left me reeling, and one of the many repercussions it had in my life was how it initially affected my eating.

For weeks after learning about the infidelity, I exercised meticulous control over what I ate in my college's cafeteria. Thankfully, I didn't develop an eating disorder that was detrimental to my health. I didn't eat too little or too much; but I made a lot of rules and kept obsessive track of them: "I'll eat no more than three desserts a week, and I'll drink no more than three glasses of soda a week, and I'll never eat a dessert AND drink a soda on the same day, and I'll eat exactly this much of this and exactly that much of that"—and I had never done *anything* like this before. Weeks went by before I started asking myself: "Why am I doing this?" And then it hit me: "Because I feel so out of control right now when it comes to what matters most to me. It feels like everything in my life has been turned upside down against my will, but the one thing that's within my control, that's *mine*, is what I eat."

It's okay to crave control, friends. Especially when crisis strikes, I think it's natural. But let's keep that craving in check. Let's regularly remind ourselves to loosen our grip just a bit and to try to walk through life with open hands.

A second warning: beware of self-discipline for the sake of perfection. In other words, try not to discipline yourself because you're desperate to be without fault or flaw—or at least desperate to appear so. Society tries to suck us into this game: the powers that be make up these ideas and images of perfection, which are both arbitrary and unattainable—and yet we become slaves to those ideas and images anyways.

A few years ago, while I was getting out of the shower, I hunched over and then looked up at myself in the mirror while I was hunched over—and I noticed this jelly roll around my stomach. I decided that I wanted to get rid of it, and for the next few weeks, I was quite self-disciplined in working towards this goal. Around that time, a friend sent me a YouTube video of a dancer performing to a rock song I really liked, called "Take Me to Church." At the very end of his performance, this dancer, who is shirtless, is on his knees, hunched over. I happened to notice that he had a couple of *tiny* jelly rolls around his stomach. And I was struck: because this is, like, one of the fittest people in the world, and even *he* has a little fat around his stomach! And of course, because—*ding ding ding*—our bodies are *made* to have fat on them! This is a natural thing, a *good* thing—so why was I so bothered by the little bit of fat on me? Why had my self-discipline become so self-critical?

Friends, trying to be perfect—the perfect spouse, the perfect parent, the perfect student, the perfect body, the perfect whatever, trying to fit ourselves into the ridiculous molds of “perfection” that society has made up—it’s a losing battle that God never intended for us to fight. The reality is that we are finite and flawed creatures. All of us stumble our way through life. All of us fall flat on our face every once in a while. And that is perfectly okay. Because God doesn’t expect us to be perfect; God expects us to get back up again, with God’s help.

Before closing with a recommendation, let’s dig just a little deeper here. Beneath self-discipline for the sake of perfection is perfection for the sake of acceptance. In other words, one of the reasons why we work so hard to be perfect is because we’re afraid that if we fall short of perfection, we won’t be accepted, won’t be loved. Deep down, many of us have bought into the lie that we are lovable when we succeed, and we are unlovable when we fail. Many of us have bought into the lie that love has to be earned. But that, friends, is the opposite of the gospel—the good news that God loves each of us unconditionally. We *cannot* earn God’s love, because it is always already ours. And we can see this love most clearly and most powerfully in Jesus, in whom God chose to be fully and uniquely present with us. This gospel, this message of love, is *never* meant to douse us in shame; it is meant to fill us with joy.

Which brings me to my closing recommendation. In our first reading, towards the end of his life, Jesus says to his closest followers, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and so that your joy may be complete.” What if we practiced self-discipline not for the sake of control or for the sake of perfection, but for the sake of joy? What if God invites us to practice self-discipline—in mind, in body, and in spirit—so that we can cultivate joy in our lives and in the world? So, we keep our diets in check and push ourselves to exercise not because we want to beat our bodies into submission or because we think we have to look a certain way in order to be accepted, but because taking care of our bodies helps us to flourish, gives us energy, frees us to have fun! We look for ways to give and to serve in church not because we like having our own little dominion here, or because we’re afraid God will stop loving us if we don’t step up, but because giving and serving brings joy into the lives of our neighbors—and into our own lives?

Friends, as we receive the gifts of this table, nourishing us for the race of faith, let us remember that we are meant to run that race both with diligence and with delight. Amen.