



Gospel Ministry Wisdom

Lesson 4 Personal Discipline

I will begin this session with a look at Paul's explanation of his own approach to the ministry. This insight is given in ***1 Corinthians 9:24-27**. In this passage Paul compares his spiritual race in the gospel ministry to a Greek athletic competition.

- Competition racers run to *receive "the prize."* As ministers of the gospel, we should strive to win the favor and prize of our great God. **Vs. 24.**
- He said those in this race must be *"temperate," Vs. 25.* He used the verb in *middle Greek voice.* In the Greek language that use of this verb form means *the subject of the verb is seen as acting on itself, for its own benefit.* Since *"temperate"* is from the Greek word **egkrateuomai** (eng-krat-yoo'-om-ah-ee) meaning *to exercise self-restraint,* it is easy to get the idea that gospel ministers must learn to restrain themselves.
- In the next verse he talked about *"beateth the air," Vs. 26.* *"Beateth"* means to thrash or smite like a boxer does in anticipating a fight. We call it *shadow punching.* God's called men are not to flail around aimlessly.
- Paul then said, *"I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection, Vs. 27.* This phrase is from the Greek word **hupopiazō** (hoop-o-pee-ad'-o) which literally means to *smite under the eye or give a black eye.* He's talking serious, passionate personal discipline. He follows with *"subjection"* which means *subdue, enslave, make captives like a slave driver does with conquered foes.*
- Yes, a serious highly disciplined life where **every thought and action is controlled** with the purpose of winning the favor and prize of the master. For personal discipline in the gospel ministry, it would be hard to envision a more dynamic call and better mortal example than Paul.
- Note that he ended this passage with a warning that failure here could result in becoming a *"castaway."* He used the Greek word **adokimos** (ad-ok'-ee-mos) which means *unapproved, worthless, rejected, reprobate.*

A lack of personal discipline and diligence has been the stagnation and downfall of many a preacher who could have meant so much more to the cause of Christ.

I. PERSONAL DISCIPLINE IS VITAL TO A GOD-APPROVED MINISTRY.

A. What personal discipline is!

1. Discipline has to do with learning to obey rules, whether the rules of others or self-imposed rules. Soldiers learn discipline, especially Marines and other elite fighting forces. Apart from personal discipline, they would be just as impotent as most other people.

2. The result of learning personal discipline is self-control, orderliness, symmetry, methodology, systematic, proper arrangement, uniformity and a certain kind of power which is not visible on the surface, but which is very real.
3. A personally disciplined preacher is orderly, methodical, systematic, well-regulated, symmetrical, organized and in control of himself. With him comes a certain kind of command, a certain air of authority and respect. *“Never man spake like this man,”* **John 7:46.**

B. These traits come from within, not from without.

1. People who are personally disciplined do not do what they do because someone is forcing them (a father, boss, policeman or drill sergeant); they do it by choice, because it’s a part of them. They have learned obedience to a set of inner rules.
2. Under God, preachers who are personally disciplined have become their own policemen. Remember that Paul used the Greek *middle voice* form of the verb *“temperant.”* Also note that *“temperance”* is a fruit of the Spirit, **Galatians 5:23.** *“Temperance”* is *self-control*, but not in the usual sense of *self-control*. Believers are under the control of the Holy Spirit, but He doesn’t force them to do what they do. They voluntarily *yield* to Him, to His control. The believer has a choice in the matter. **Preachers who are personally disciplined are willfully so; they have learned to voluntarily obey the Spirit’s rules about keeping self in subjection and pleasing their Master with the best, most diligent service they can possibly give Him.**

C. They have integrated accountability into their lives and take it seriously.

1. Not merely accountability to a deacon board, church or the opinion of others, but accountability to self before God, and ultimately directly to Him.
2. *“And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men,”* **Colossians 3:23.** A sobering thought which should motivate every gospel minister to give his best to the Lord whether in public view or in the dark is the constant awareness that God sees everything all of the time. We’re always accountable unto Him. **Romans 14:12. Hebrews 13:17**

D. I am aware of the pious argument against personal discipline.

1. The argument is that any effort on our parts to control self and deliberate efforts to do our best is to infringe upon God and take matters into our own hands. Preachers who practice personal discipline are accused of acting in *the energy of the flesh* and for self-glory.
2. They pervert the scriptural idea that *“it’s all of God.”* They seem to forget that *“we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us,”* **2 Corinthians 4:7.** God works in human vessels. The fact that He does in no way diminishes His power or glory. There is a division of labor; His part and our part, but it’s all His power that makes it possible, and He gets 100% of the credit and glory. His part is to supply the resources and power; our part is to submit to and obey Him which is what personal discipline is.

3. One of the reasons the super-pious argue against the concept of personal discipline and the giving of our best to God is personal responsibility. If all is of God to the point that we have no responsibility, then God can be blamed whether or not we succeed. Therefore we have no guilt when things go bad; it's all God's fault.

II. SLOTHFULNESS IS ALWAYS A THREAT TO MINISTERS.

A. Most preachers, especially pastors, have no *boss*.

1. There is no one with direct, immediate authority or supervisory capacity over them. They are pretty well their own bosses.
2. They have to be **self-starters**: structure their own use of time, make their own daily schedule and calendar, establish their own hierarchy of priorities, do their own planning (or ignore planning), build their own sermons, everything.
3. There is no immediate accountability. Ultimately there will be consequences for how things go (criticism, members disgruntled, unhappy or shrinking church, scorn, rude and early exit); but no *boss* to penalize for being late or slothful, nobody to direct or supervise, nobody from whom you have to get permission or approval and no immediate impact on pay.

B. The results for a preacher with no or little personal discipline can be disastrous, a true *shipwreck*.

1. Inevitably the absence of personal discipline produces an undisciplined life and a helter-skelter ministry: disorder, unstructured, hodgepodge, chaotic, confusion, turmoil, trouble, little or no forward progress, a *fly-by-the-seat-of-the-pants* operation which nearly always produces fruitlessness.
2. Over time the church, missionary effort or other area of ministry will increasingly reflect the undisciplined life of the pastor or missionary. In a church there will be disorder, disarray, no leadership, a whelm-oriented knee-jerk operation and often gridlock.

C. Not always, but usually, *laziness and neglect* accompany the absence of personal discipline.

1. An undisciplined approach to most things: time, church facilities, worship service, hygiene and personal appearance, appointments, planning, the business of the church, promptness, dependability.
2. Generally these are the *good ole boys*: fun-loving, life of the party, full of promises and good intentions, always with a great *gift of gab*, love to *fellowship*.
3. This kind of ministry is almost always noted for *good intentions* with very little *follow-through*. It seems that preachers who operate this way just never seem to get around to taking care of business. There are too many distractions.

D. There is a high and painful price to be paid for a lack of personal discipline.

1. Two often-used Bible words are in direct contrast. They are *diligent* and *slothful*.
 - a) *Diligent* embodies the concept of personal discipline: refined, honed, pointed, earnest, intense, in control.
 - b) *Slothful* embodies the concept of idleness, slackness, undisciplined, carelessness and laziness.
2. The Bible speaks with great power about both approaches to life.
 - a) “*He becometh poor that dealeth with a slack hand: but the hand of the diligent maketh rich,*” **Proverbs 10:4**. See also **Proverbs 12:24, 27, Proverbs 13:4**.
 - b) **Proverbs 27:23** is a verse that is ideally suited for gospel ministers who are spiritual shepherds. “*Be thou diligent to know the state of thy flocks, and look well to thy herds,*” **Proverbs 27:23**.
 - c) Every preacher would do well to heed the words of Peter. ***2 Peter 3:14**
3. I have personally observed that lack of discipline and idleness have been the ruin of many preachers. They were floaters, who followed the paths of least resistance, who never buckled down. It cost them dearly.
4. No preacher should blame the consequences of an undisciplined approach on God.

E. There are lots of ways to be undisciplined and unstructured.

1. Especially with time. Up late; sleeping in. Days and nights mixed up. No serious schedule.
2. Money. No budget.
3. Study habits. Study becomes a tack-on.
4. Preaching. Sloppy.
5. Relationships. Not tended well.
6. Prayer life. Almost non-existent.
7. Attitude and spirit. Critical, sour, negative.

Paul said God’s ministers must “*endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ,*” **2 Timothy 2:2**. Too many preachers are wimpy, and know almost nothing of *hardness*, toughness, doing your job and doing it well even when you don’t feel like you can go another step. Personal discipline is not easy. It’s much easier to float, take the path of least resistance and never buckle down.

This is God’s ministry. He put us in it, and allows us to be a part of what He’s doing. God forbid that we ever take it lightly, and give anything short of our best!