

Classic Christian Writings:

If discipline is weak, even the best equipped army is liable to crack when faced with hardship or adversity. Of course discipline is an unpopular word in a society where authority is being attacked and undermined. Here the attitude of the Christian soldier must stand out in sharpest contrast to the spirit of the age. We are called to be disciples, that is, disciplined men and women. This is a vital element in Christian soldiering.

It is a tremendous truth that we "do not live under law but under God's grace" (Rom. 6:14). This is setting many free from a life of struggling and bringing them into victory. Trying to live the Christian life by rules and regulations only leads to defeat and frustration. "Christ has set us free!" exclaims Paul, "Stand, then, as freemen, and do not allow yourselves to become slaves again" (Gal. 5:1).

But we must not forget that he goes on to say, "Do not let this freedom become an excuse for letting your physical desires rule you" (verse 3). When liberty leads to license you end up with a worse kind of slavery. It's great to step on the accelerator, but if you don't know how to apply the brake, you're heading for trouble! Liberty must be balanced by discipline.

A child needs to be disciplined by parents and teachers. But this is only to help him to discipline himself and so be fitted for responsibility. How can he control others if he has never learned to control himself? So it is self-discipline, or "self-control" (Gal. 5:2, temperance AV) to use the Bible word, which I want to emphasize in this article. This means firstly facing up to the temptations of the body.

Our bodies are only evil in so far as they are dominated by our fallen nature. Through grace we are freed from this dominion (Rom. 8:1-4). Then the body becomes an instrument to serve the plan of God. It is like a telephone by which the world communicates with us, and we with the world. This is why we are told to present our bodies to God (Rom. 12:1) that Christ may be expressed through us.

The Creator has placed within us bodily desires for food, for sleep, and for sex. Through "the fall" these appetites, given for our enjoyment as well as the necessary preservation of life, have got out of hand. Very often they master us when we should master them.

A hearty appetite degenerates into gluttony, a healthy desire for sleep into laziness, and normal sex desire, which God designed for marriage, into lust and licentiousness. Self-discipline means gaining the mastery over our appetites just as a colt has to be broken in. Paul puts it this way: "I could say, 'I am allowed to do anything'; but I am not going to let anything make a slave of me" (1 Cor. 6:12).

The seeking of sensual pleasure only proves the truth of Jesus' words, "Whoever drinks this water will get thirsty again." But dissatisfaction and frustration are not the most serious consequences of throwing self-restraint to the winds. The door of the human personality is thus opened to evil spirits. Drug-taking has the same effect. "A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls" (Prov. 25:28).

Where a nation makes sensual pleasure its goal, as did ancient Rome, it is sowing the seeds of its own destruction. It is here the Christian soldier must fight for Christian standards. He is to be salt in a decaying society. But what if the salt has lost its taste? What if the Christian himself is enslaved to his own appetites? How can he fight the corruption around him?

Vigilance will always be needed, for even great men have lapsed badly here. Noah is described as a blameless man who walked with God, and yet his son found him in his tent drunk and naked (Gen. 6:9; 9:21).

Self-discipline, however, is not simply a question of overcoming the sins of the flesh. It enables the Christian to win the prize in the spiritual contest. "Every athlete in training submits to strict discipline" explains Paul, "he does so in order to be crowned with a wreath that will not last; but we do it for one that will last for ever" (1 Cor. 9:25).

If the athlete does not exercise self-discipline that "extra" he needs in the race will not be there, and someone else will break the tape first. Similarly, the soldier will be unable to endure suffering, to hold out in the day of adversity, and will win no decoration for his part in the battle. So the matter is one of great importance if we have an eye for the coming day of reckoning and reward.

The disciplining of the mind is no less important than that of the body. Our minds are under constant

bombardment by enemy propaganda. How easily the thought life becomes infected by pride, uncleanness, ambition, or jealousy. We are afflicted with wandering thoughts or we waste time in foolish daydreaming. The New Testament makes it quite clear that we are responsible to discipline our minds.

Peter writes to believers facing end-time persecutions and pressures—a message which will become increasingly relevant as the age draws to its close. He has some important things to say about the mind (1 Peter 1:13, 4:7; cf. 5:8).

“Have your minds ready for action,” or as the older versions have it, “Gird up the loins of your mind”—a fitting word for the scatterbrained! Later he says, “The end of all things is near. You must be self-controlled and alert [keep sane and sober RSV], to be able to pray.” Both words suggest a disciplined state of mind, not intoxicated by the spirit of the age. Paul is even more explicit. He says, “We take every thought captive and make it obey Christ” (2 Col. 12:5).

Closely associated with the mind are the emotions and affections. These too must be disciplined. In his Patmos vision John sees the glorified Son of Man “with a golden girdle round his breast” (Rev. 1:13), that is, His affections and emotions are controlled by His divine character. Though at times Jesus displayed deep emotion He was never carried away by His feelings. If we find ourselves overcome by excitement, fear, anger or resentment we need to take our emotions in hand. Paul reminded Timothy, “God did not give us a spirit of timidity but of power and love and self-control” (2 Tim. 1:7).

Perhaps it is the tongue that calls for the greatest self-control of all. What irreparable damage has been done to the cause of Christ by criticism, gossip, slander, back-biting, misrepresentation, exaggeration, and many other activities of that small unruly member.

James, who has most to say about this, insists that a man’s religion is worthless if he hasn’t learned to control his tongue, but that the man who never slips up here is perfect, and is able to control his whole body (James 1:26; 3:2). “No man has ever been able to tame the tongue,” declares James (James 3:8), and yet the tongue must be tamed. What is impossible to man is possible to God.

How is this self-discipline to be accomplished? First, we must recognize that it is not only needed but commanded of us as soldiers of Christ, therefore it must be possible. To assert otherwise would be to make God a tyrant. Second, we must admit that we cannot do it ourselves. It is not dependent on our strength of will, so we are all in the same boat here.

Thirdly, there must be within us a God-given determination to take ourselves in hand with the strength that He gives. Discipleship means saying “No!” to self by embracing the cross (Luke 9:23). So many of us pamper when we ought to pummel.

Paul says, “I harden my body with blows and bring it under complete control” (1 Cor. 9:27). And again, “Endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ” (2 Tim. 2:3). Augustine spoke of having toward God a heart of flame, toward man a heart of love, and toward himself a heart of steel.

Finally, we must reckon on the fact of the cross, and of the indwelling Spirit. Look again at the opening of Romans 6. Remember what happened to us when Jesus died. Move on to chapter 8 and read Paul’s triumphant declaration: “The law of the Spirit, which brings us life in union with Christ Jesus, has set me free from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:2). Remember, “self-control” (literally “inward strength”) is not the fruit of our striving but “the fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5 :22,23).

Fasting, a practice encouraged in the Bible, may greatly help us in this whole matter of self-discipline.