

The Freedom of Discipline
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When I say the word discipline, what comes into your mind? Most people think discipline is something to be dreaded. They think it's drudgery or self-denial that takes all the fun out of life. They think of discipline as a bondage that steals our freedom.

Today I want to show you that nothing could be further from the truth. It is actually the lack of discipline that takes the fun out of life. It's a lack of discipline that steals our freedom, destroys our dreams and ruins our lives. Think about it. How many undisciplined people do you know that have accomplished much of anything in life? They're the ones who want to make a lot of money but don't have the discipline to work. They want to save their marriage but they aren't disciplined enough to go to counseling or work on their relationship. They want to know God without praying or reading the Bible. In short, they want to reap a harvest without sowing the seeds.

But the truth is that discipline does not steal our freedom or our joy. Discipline actually leads to freedom and joy. So, I'm preaching today on The Freedom of Discipline.

We've been preaching on discipleship all year. Did you know that the words disciple and discipline come from the same root word? A disciple is one who learns – not just for information, but for life transformation. A disciple is someone who follows another to learn from them and become like them. That process involves discipline, training, and correction.

Discipline is the act of consistent study, training and correction that result in learning and self-control. Discipline is self-control. We sometimes think it should be God control. That God should be making us do this or that. So we blame Him for the outcome.

We eat whatever is placed in front of us and we don't exercise and we get sick and wonder why God allowed it. People have unprotected sex with multiple partners and blame God when they get an STD. The point is this: either we discipline ourselves or we will be disciplined.

It has been said that discipline is what we need the most and what we want the least. This explains why so many marriages end in divorce and students quit school, and people quit their jobs and Christians abandon the faith.

Many of them simply don't have the discipline required to advance in life. And everything in life requires some sort of discipline. Whether it's hitting a baseball, climbing a mountain, making good grades, losing weight, or growing in

your faith - it all requires discipline.

The Bible compares the Christian life to running a race. 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 says:

Don't you realize that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win! All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. So I run with purpose in every step. I am not just shadowboxing. I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified.

In this passage Paul is trying to illustrate how life is like a race. Athletes must be extremely disciplined. They must train rigorously and give up certain foods and activities. In the end all they win is a crown that won't last.

But we run the race of life for a crown that will last forever. This is why we discipline ourselves. So God can use us whenever and wherever he wants. So we can win the prize of the high calling of Christ Jesus. But we can't do this if we lack self-discipline. Because there will always be things that will distract us if we let them. We will be tempted to quit, to give up, to take the easy way.

Many people have goals that will never be reached, and visions that will never materialize because they lack discipline.

You can't become a doctor without years of hard study.

You can't become a great musician without hours of practice.

You can't accomplish anything great without discipline.

Why? Because discipline is simply doing what needs to be done when it needs to be done in order to bring about the desired results.

And notice, Paul says that the lack of self-discipline results in the discipline of God.

One of the Greek words for discipline means "to be of sound mind."

2 Timothy 1:7 says:

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

To have a sound mind means to have a disciplined mind. In fact- the NIV says:

For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.

And discipline results in freedom. We sometimes make the mistake of thinking that the purpose of discipline is discipline itself. But the purpose of discipline is freedom, not the discipline in itself.

Every discipline has a corresponding freedom.
 If you pray you enjoy the freedom of answered prayer.
 If you study you enjoy the freedom of knowledge.
 If you exercise you enjoy the freedom of health.
 The freedom is the end and discipline is merely the means.

The moment we make the discipline our central focus, it becomes a law and we forfeit our freedom. Discipline for the sake of discipline is bondage. Colossians 2:20-23 says:

You have died with Christ, and He has set you free from the spiritual powers of this world. So why do you keep on following the rules of the world, such as, "Don't handle! Don't taste! Don't touch!"? Such rules are mere human teachings about things that deteriorate as we use them. These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline. But they provide no help in conquering a person's evil desires.

Deb and I knew a couple who were the most disciplined people we've ever known. The husband studied hard and earned a Doctorate Degree in Psychology. The wife had a career and worked extremely hard. They exercised, ate well, went to church every Sunday and never fought with each other. From all appearances they were the ideal couple. Until it was discovered that one of them was having an affair. After 37 years of marriage they divorced and went their separate ways.

The strict discipline in their lives was based on outward adherence to regulations. In the end this did nothing to restrain sensual indulgence. You see it's not enough to adhere to a rigid set of rules. A rigid adherence to external rules only brings death. Will power alone is not enough. Discipline alone cannot transform the inner you.

We already saw that God gives us power, love and self-discipline. You see, we have a part and God has a part. We can't do God's part and He won't do our part. Our part is to discipline ourselves and God's part is to change us inside. If you don't believe me just think about the last time you tried to give up something like your favorite food or smoking, or shopping or internet games. You'll figure out really quickly how much you need God's help. 2 Corinthians 3:17 says:

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

One of the ways the Spirit brings freedom into our lives is through self-control. Galatians 5:22-23 says:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

That's an ironic thing. God works in us to produce self-control. All of us can relate to trying to discipline ourselves...and failing miserably. That's because we're trying to do it on our own. It doesn't work that way. Discipline is a fruit of the spirit in us.

The fruit of the Spirit is not a gift of the Spirit. Gifts are given, but fruit is grown. That takes time and sowing seed and pulling weeds and pruning and being watered by the word and making right decisions over and over.

There is a freedom that comes from disciplining yourself to spend time with God in His word on a regular basis. James 2:12 says:

Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom.

There is a freedom that comes from following God's laws. This is not talking about the Old Testament law. That resulted in bondage, not freedom. This is talking about the law of Christ. Remember, the great commission of Christ tells us to obey all His commands.

Freedom comes from disciplining yourself to know and do God's word. James 1:22-25 says:

Don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it.

Disciplining yourself to hear and do God's Word – the perfect law of liberty – results in freedom and the blessing of God. Psalm 119:45 says:

I will walk in freedom, for I have devoted myself to your commandments.

Notice that freedom comes from being devoted to God's commands.

Devotion is not about "have to" but "want to."

Devotion is about love for God and a zeal for God.

When you devote yourself to God and you discipline yourself to follow His word – it results in freedom.

Some people think God's laws are restrictive so they choose to be free of them. So they end up in bondage to a substance, activity or person – they're called addictions.

They're addicted, but they think they are free.

I know people who live life saying - "I don't want anyone telling me what to do. If someone tells me I can't do something that makes me more determined to do it." Most of the time those people end up being addicts.

Their quest to be free of any rules or limits or boundaries ends up in the bondage of addiction and the destruction of their lives.

Real freedom comes from following God's ways – one of which is discipline and abstaining from those things that will hurt me.

I am the freest physically when I discipline myself in diet & exercise. When I am undisciplined in eating, I get into bondage to food. When I discipline myself physically to eat right and exercise, I have the freedom of being in shape and having good health. Being able to mow my yard without passing out.

I am the freest financially when I discipline myself through budgeting. When I am undisciplined in my finances, I get into the bondage of debt. When I discipline myself, I am free from debt.

I am the freest spiritually when I discipline myself to pray and read God's word. I want to live a long life and live it in fullness and freedom, not bondage. God's truth leads to freedom and success in every area of our lives.

The church is filled with people who have good intentions. People who want to be mature Christians, who desire knowledge of God's word... But they're not willing to pay the price to achieve it.

Someone once said to a great Bible Scholar "I'd give my life to know the Bible like you do." To which the Bible Scholar replied, "That's what it took - a lifetime of study and dedication."

If you're not praying or reading your Bible every day...start with 5 minutes. God will meet you where you are. If you wait for the perfect set of circumstances you'll probably wait forever. So, "Just do it."

Who I am tomorrow is determined by how I live today. Advancing in life is a by product of how I live my life day by day.

I can't spend my time watching TV, or surfing the web or playing computer games and expect to advance in life. How we spend our time every day will determine our success.

Two of the biggest areas where we need discipline are in our health and our finances. You may be thinking Health and finances? What's that got to do with church or God? Health and finances aren't spiritual. But God is concerned with every area of our lives. 1 Thessalonians 5:23 says:

May the God of peace Himself make you entirely pure and devoted to God; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept strong and blameless until that day when our Lord Jesus Christ comes back again.

Christianity is very practical, touching every area of our lives. It's not just spiritual; it's also physical. The issue is one of importance and priority.

Obviously, the spiritual is most important. But, we must balance every area of our lives. 1 Timothy 4:8 says:

For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come.

This means bodily exercise is good for a little while in comparison to eternity. Jesus said in Matthew 16:26

What profit is there if you gain the whole world and lose eternal life?

What does it profit:

If you are in great shape physically, but dead spiritually?

If you can run a marathon, but cannot walk the Christian walk?

If you eat a balanced diet, but live on spiritual junk food?

Obviously, in the ultimate sense, our spiritual condition is more important than our physical condition. But, the verse in 1 Timothy does say our physical condition is important during this lifetime.

What does it profit if we take care of ourselves spiritually but die 20 years premature because we don't take care of ourselves physically?

What good is it if I kill myself in the process of building this church? I won't even reap the rewards. So I have chosen to discipline myself.

In the early days of planting this church, Deb and I had to discipline ourselves to rest by taking a day off a week. We were working 24/7 and it was taking its toll on our relationship and our bodies. That was no good for any of us.

God wants us to put a high priority on taking care of ourselves physically because our bodies are His temple. 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 says:

Haven't you yet learned that your body is the home of the Holy Spirit God gave you, and that He lives within you? Your own body does not belong to you. For God has bought you with a great price. So use every part of your body to give glory back to God because he owns it.

To do that we must discipline ourselves and deal decisively with all our excuses. Don't fall into the trap of looking for a quick fix. You have to make lifestyle changes. It takes time, but the rewards will be worth it.

Some believers get upset when it seems like non-Christians can be more blessed than Christians.

But sometimes they are disciplining themselves and reaping the benefits.
If you don't take care of your yard and your neighbor takes care of theirs – their yard will be blessed and yours won't.

I can be a Christian, read my Bible, pray, go to church – but if I don't discipline myself in eating and exercise, I will be out of shape and susceptible to disease.

If a non-Christian takes care of their body, eats right, exercises – they will reap the blessing of health.

I can be a Christian, read my Bible, pray, go to church, even tithe – but if I don't discipline my finances, don't budget, spend indiscriminately, have high-interest debt – my finances won't be blessed.

If a non-Christian takes care of their finances, saves, spends wisely, etc. – they will be blessed financially.

We need to commit to disciplining ourselves.
Do you know when most people do that? When it's too late.
When the spouse says I'm leaving.
When the doctor says do it or die.

The sooner you start the better off you are!
More discipline will result in improved skills which result in better options and the blessing of God.
Less discipline results in inadequate skills which result in fewer options and the lack of blessing.

So – I encourage you to tap into the freedom of discipline.

Discipline yourself to spend time with God in prayer and Bible study and you will receive the freedom that comes from the law of liberty.

Discipline yourself to eat right and exercise and you will have greater freedom in your physical health.

Discipline yourself to manage your money God's way and you will have greater freedom in your finances.

Discipline yourself to have the hard conversations in your relationships and at work and you will experience greater freedom in both places.

Because discipline results in freedom!