

Grace to You :: *esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Learning Self-Discipline

Scripture: Proverbs 15:31–32; Proverbs 19:20; Song of Solomon 2:15; 1 Corinthians 10:31; Ephesians 5:15–16

Code: A197

For many years, I have had the privilege of knowing the renowned classical guitarist Christopher Parkening. By the time he was thirty, he had become a master of his instrument. But such mastery did not come easily or cheaply. While other children played and participated in sports, he spent several hours a day practicing the guitar. The result of that self-disciplined commitment is proficiency on his instrument that few can match.

Self-discipline is important in any endeavor of life. It's best defined as the ability to regulate one's conduct by principle and sound judgment, rather than by impulse, desire, or social custom. Biblically, self-discipline may be summarized in one word: obedience. To exercise self-discipline is to avoid evil by staying within the bounds of God's law.

I'm grateful for my parents, coaches, professors, and the others who helped me develop self-discipline in my own life. People who have the ability to concentrate, focus on their goals, and consistently stay within their priorities tend to succeed. Whether in academics, the arts, or athletics, success generally comes to the self-disciplined.

Since self-discipline is so important, how do you develop it? How can parents help their children develop it? Here are some practical tips that I've found helpful:

Start with small things.

Clean your room at home or your desk at work. Train yourself to put things where they belong when they are out of place. Make the old adage "A place for everything and everything in its place" your motto. After you've cleaned your room or desk, extend that discipline of neatness to the rest of your house and workplace. Get yourself to the point where orderliness matters. Learn how to keep your environment clean and clear so you can function without a myriad of distractions. Such neatness will further develop self-discipline by forcing you to make decisions about what is important and what is not.

Learning self-discipline in the little things of life prepares the way for big successes. On the other hand, those who are undisciplined in small matters will likely be undisciplined in more important issues. In the words of Solomon, it is the little foxes that ruin the vineyards (Song of Solomon 2:15). And when it comes to a person's integrity and credibility, there are no small issues.

A famous rhyme, based on the defeat of King Richard III of England at the battle of Bosworth Field in 1485, illustrates the importance of concentrating on small details:

For want of a nail, a shoe was lost,

For want of a shoe, a horse was lost,
For want of a horse, a battle was lost,
For want of a battle, a kingdom was lost,
And all for want of a horseshoe nail.

Get yourself organized.

Make a schedule, however detailed or general you are comfortable with, and stick to it. Have a to-do list of things you need to accomplish. Using a daily planning book or a personal information manager program on your computer would be helpful. But get organized, even if all you do is jot down appointments and to-do items on a piece of scrap paper. The simple reality is that if you don't control your time, everything (and everyone) else will.

Don't constantly seek to be entertained.

When you have free time, do things that are productive instead of merely entertaining. Read a good book, listen to classical music, take a walk, or have a conversation with someone. In other words, learn to entertain yourself with things that are challenging, stimulating, and creative. Things that are of no value except to entertain you make a very small contribution to your well-being.

Be on time.

If you're supposed to be somewhere at a specific time, be there on time. The apostle Paul listed proper use of time as a mark of true spiritual wisdom: "Be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil" (Ephesians 5:15-16). Being punctual marks a life that is organized. It reveals a person whose desires, activities, and responsibilities are under control. Being on time also acknowledges the importance of other people and the value of their time.

Keep your word.

"Undertake not what you cannot perform," a young George Washington exhorted himself, "but be careful to keep your promise." If you say you're going to do something, do it—when you said you would do it and how you said you would do it. When you make commitments, see them through. That calls for the discipline to properly evaluate whether you have the time and capability to do something. And once you've made the commitment, self-discipline will enable you to keep it.

Do the most difficult tasks first.

Most people do just the opposite, spending their time doing the easier, low priority tasks. But when they run out of time (and energy), the difficult, high-priority tasks are left undone.

Finish what you start.

Some people's lives are a sad litany of unfinished projects. In the words of poet John Greenleaf Whittier,

For of all sad words of tongue or pen, The saddest are these: "It might have been!"

If you start something, finish it. Therein lies an important key to developing self-discipline.

Accept correction.

Correction helps you develop self-discipline by showing you what you need to avoid. Thus, it should not be rejected, but accepted gladly. Solomon wrote "Listen to counsel and accept discipline, that you may be wise the rest of your days" (Proverbs 19:20); and "He whose ear listens to the life giving reproof will dwell among the wise. He who neglects discipline despises himself, but he who listens to reproof acquires understanding" (Proverbs 15:31-32).

Practice self-denial.

Learn to say no to your feelings and impulses. Occasionally deny yourself pleasures that are perfectly legitimate for you to enjoy. Skip dessert after a meal. Drink a glass of iced tea instead of having that banana split that you love. Don't eat that doughnut that caught your eye. Refraining from those things will remind your body who is in charge.

Welcome responsibility.

Volunteer to do things that need to be done. That will force you to have your life organized enough to have the time for such projects.

These practical suggestions may not seem to involve any deep spiritual principles. Yet you cannot split your life into the secular and the spiritual. Instead you must live every aspect of your life to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31). And self-discipline cultivated in the seemingly mundane things of life will spill over into the spiritual realm.

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