

Any skill, art, or good habit requires more than effort and knowledge. It also requires hours of training and practice. For instance, someone asked former NFL quarterback, Andrew Luck, what he thinks about when he drops back to pass. I mean being an NFL quarterback is mindboggling. There are eleven men on each team, each one moving simultaneously. And as a quarterback, there are a bunch of really big men trying to destroy you. It's like an entire life-sized chess match is being played in the blink of an eye. The quarterback has about three seconds to survey the entire field, assess all the patterns, find the most open teammate, and throw a perfect strike to a man who's often in a full-out sprint.

This is what made Luck's answer so startling. When asked what he thinks about when he drops back to pass, he said, "You don't want to think about it." He then described how passing mechanics have to be so deeply ingrained in the body that they're on autopilot during the game.

But how do you get to that point where you can be on autopilot when 300-pound opponents, who are faster than you, want to crush you into the ground? The answer, of course, is practice. With any skill or performance, information alone isn't enough; it must be translated into know-how in the body. It's true for athletes, musicians, actors, plumbers, engineers, surgeons, nurses, auto mechanics, and hedge fund managers. Practice allows the skills required for these positions to become so ingrained you do them automatically.

We're continuing our series on spiritual formation, called "Formed." This is the second pillar of our vision to be transformed people, transforming the Peninsula. To be agents of transformation, we have to be transformed, and that happens through spiritual formation. Remember, we've defined spiritual formation as the process of intentionally opening our lives to the work of the Spirit to become more like Christ. Spiritual formation is about growing in our faith; being transformed into the image of Jesus.

Two weeks ago, we asked the question, whose job is it? We said spiritual formation is 100 percent us and 100 percent God. We also identified four ingredients involved in being formed into the image of Jesus. Last week we talked about the first ingredient, which is worldview. The other three ingredients are practices, life with others, and life experiences. Now we're talking about practices.

### **The Call To Be A Good And Godly Servant Of Jesus**

To start with regarding practices, I want us to look at 1 Timothy 4:6-10. It's found toward the back of your New Testament. It's a letter written by the apostle Paul to a young man named Timothy who was pastoring a church in the city of Ephesus (modern-day Turkey). False teachers were threatening the stability and integrity of the Christian community there. They were what we might call legalists. Paul describes some of their teachings in 4:3-5.

**They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer. 1 Timothy 4:3-5**

Paul combats their legalism with what we might call the doctrine of creation. He says, "How can anyone forbid marriage when God created it? How can you forbid eating certain food when God created them to be received and enjoyed with thanksgiving and prayer?"

Then Paul goes on and tells Timothy what it will look like for him to maintain his own integrity as God's servant in that place.

**If you point these things out to the brothers and sisters, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, nourished on the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed. Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. That is why we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe. 4:6-10**

Notice that phrase, "a good minister of Christ Jesus." He's not thinking of Timothy as a member of the clergy as we might think of a pastor of a church. The word used here is, *diaconos*, which basically means servant. Yes, Timothy had particular responsibilities as a pastor, but each of us is called to be "a good servant of Christ Jesus." We've all been given gifts. We've all been called to do the work of the ministry. We're all called to be a servant of Jesus. Part of spiritual formation is becoming a "good servant of Christ Jesus."

Notice also he uses the word godliness here. That word appears 15 times in the New Testament, and a whopping nine of those are found right here in 1 Timothy alone. What is godliness? The Greek word means respect or reverence for God. But it's a reverence that plays out in everyday life. I like how Kent Hughes puts it,

**“Godliness is not piety as we generally think of is — upturned eyes and folded hands. Godliness can't be cloistered. The godly among us are those people whose reverent worship of God flows into obedience throughout the week.”**

Again, this relates to spiritual formation. The goal of spiritual formation is to become godly; people who are in awe of God and then live that out in the real world.

But the million-dollar question is, how do we do that? How do we become good and godly servants of Christ Jesus? What we're going to see is spiritual formation isn't so much about trying harder to act like Jesus, but it's about training wisely through spiritual practices.

### **Diet: A Good Servant Will Be Nourished By God's Word**

In this text, Paul focuses on two different but closely related things. Both of these two things point to what we're calling practices. The first has to do with diet, and the second has to do with exercise.

Let's start with diet. Of course, we know all about the importance of our diet. According to the USDA, the average person spends about 28,000 hours eating over a lifetime, that's over 1160 days. Our daily schedules are often planned around meals. Business deals are cut among people who “do” lunch together. Foods have been adapted to every aspect of our popular culture: we have TV dinners, drive-up windows, and tailgate parties. At the same time, each day millions of us are dieting.

But as you might have guessed, Paul isn't talking about our physical diet, but rather our spiritual diet. He says a good servant doesn't just teach others, but he himself is “nourished on the truths of the faith...” Of course, the truths of the faith are found in the solid food of God's Word. One of the challenging things about this is we're often tempted to feed on that which is not nourishing. That's why Paul tells us to reject spiritual junk food, which he refers to as “godless myths and old wives tales.”

There are a lot of things we can feed on, especially in this information age. You can feed on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. You can feed on Apple News. You can feed on Netflix. You can feed on the NFL, MLB, or ESPN. If that's all you're feeding on, then you'll be a spiritually undernourished servant of Jesus. You see, what you feed on will determine how you're formed. It's not that we have to eliminate any of those things as though they're

wrong, but we do have to regulate them because too much is habit-forming and unhealthy. How often do you go to Jack-In-The-Box? Don't answer that! But we all know what junk food is, and we all know you can't stay healthy on a regular diet of it. And that applies to our spiritual formation as well. If you want to grow, you have to feed on what really nourishes your soul, and that's the truths of our faith. What's great is there are so many ways we can do that. We can listen to God's Word or sermons in our car. We can read it on your phone. We can watch great preaching on the internet. It doesn't matter how we do it. We just need to get God's Word into our system. Read it. Study it. Listen to it. Meditate on it. Discuss it. Memorize it.

This past summer, I taught a class on leadership for our Pastoral Residents and some of our staff. Each week they had to memorize a Bible verse or two on the particular subject we were discussing that day. It was a lot of work. But I gave them an incentive — I told them I'd buy any of them lunch if at the end of they could recite all 25+ verses perfectly. They could even bring a friend. I was pretty sure no one could do it, and by the end, it appeared no one had a chance. It was just too much. But then our South Campus CPC Kids Director, Megan Horvath, came into my office with a few of her colleagues and proceeded to rattle off all those verses. I was shocked, and soon to be broke! But I was so proud of her. I used to memorize Scripture, but not so much anymore. Why did I stop? Remember that Bible verse, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Ps 119:11). Whatever happened to that? You see, it's still true. When we talk about spiritual practices, start with your diet. Nourish yourselves every day with His Word.

### **Exercise: A Good Servant Will Train For Godliness**

We talked about diet, now let's talk about exercise. Look at what Paul says at the end of verse 7, “...train yourself to be godly.” The word “train” is a translation of the Greek word *gymnos*, which actually means naked. We get our English word, gymnasium, from this. At Greek athletic contests, the athletes competed naked so their movements wouldn't be hindered by clothing. In any event, this is a word that smells like sweat.

But Paul isn't telling is to buy a gym membership. He's talking about spiritual training. If we're going to grow in godliness to be like Jesus, we'll have to commit ourselves to spiritual training. This is the 100 percent you that I've been talking about. This is you working out through training what God is working in you. And, by the way, this is a principle that applies to all of life. We all know this true.

Take the world of business. Peter Drucker, known as the founder of modern management, wrote,

**“Effectiveness...is a habit; that is, a complex of practices. And practices can always be learned. Practices are simple, deceptively so; even a**

seven-year-old has no difficulty in understanding a practice. But practices are always exceedingly hard to do well. They have to be acquired, as we all learn the multiplication table; that is, repeated ad nauseam until "6 x 6 = 36" has become an unthinking, conditioned reflex, and a firmly ingrained habit. Practices one learns by practicing and practicing and practicing again."

I went to a Warriors game and got there early to watch warm-ups. I arrived 90 minutes before the game, and there was one player on the court - Steph Curry. What do you think he was doing? He was shooting. You know that little shot he takes near the basket where he just kind of flips it up with perfect touch? He did it from the same place about 50 times. And then he took three-pointers, again repeating the same shot from the same place over and over again. He must have taken 500 shots before the game even started! His ability to score is the product of thousands of shots and hours of practice.

The problem is that practicing is often very boring and tedious. So many of you love superhero movies: Batman, Iron Man, Superman, Wonder Woman, or Spider-Man. Almost all these movies have the same formulaic plot. At the beginning of the movie, our not-yet-a-hero is just an ordinary person. Then some accident happens in a lab, or they discover they've been a mutant since birth, and with that discovery, they become a superhero with superpowers. They fight somebody and win, and then the movie is over.

But there's also a crucial part of the standard superhero movie that usually gets covered in just a few brief scenes: the training. Usually, superhero training is handled in what's known as a montage. You know, some cool song plays on the soundtrack while we see our newly minted hero trying out this or that superpower. Peter Parker covers his room with spider webs. Bruce Wayne pummels things in the mountains of Nepal. The movie is saying, "The hero is learning things, he's practicing his powers, and we know it's boring so we're going to show this happened then quickly skip to the exciting part. Hang with us, and we'll get to the real fun stuff soon."

Why? Because practicing and training are boring. But nothing happens without the training. Without the training, our hero is just a person with a bunch of cool powers that he doesn't know how to harness. Without the training, the world isn't saved, and the bad guys aren't thwarted. Without the training, we don't have a story; we just have a hero who gets squashed with hardly a thought on the villain's way to total victory.

What if the same is true in the spiritual life? Many people believe that it is. Elton Trueblood was a 20th-century theologian and writer who was also a chaplain at both Stanford and Harvard. He wrote,

"We have not advanced very far in our spiritual lives if we have not encountered the basic paradox of freedom... that we are most free when we are bound. But not just any way of being bound will suffice; what matters is the character of our binding. The one who would be an athlete, but who is unwilling to discipline his body by regular exercise and by abstinence, is not free to excel on the field or the track. His failure to train rigorously denies him the freedom to run with the desired speed and endurance. With one concerted voice, the giants of the devotional life apply the same principle to the whole of life: Discipline is the price of freedom."

Another favorite of mine is Elizabeth Elliott, the wife of martyred missionary Jim Elliott and a great writer. She said this,

**"Freedom and discipline have come to be regarded as mutually exclusive, when in fact freedom is not at all the opposite, but the final reward, of discipline. It is to be bought with a high price, not merely claimed... The [professional] skater and [race] horse are free to perform as they do only because they've been subjected to countless hours of grueling work, rigidly prescribed, faithfully carried out. Men are free to soar into space because they've willingly confined themselves in a tiny capsule designed and produced by highly trained scientists and craftsmen, have meticulously followed instructions and submitted themselves to rules which others defined."**

What we're talking about is forming spiritual habits. The word practice implies we have to work on developing certain skills until they become habitual, like Andrew Luck said, "You don't want to think about it." You see, our habits form us. Habits reduce the need for sheer will-power because habits have a momentum all their own. When we're in the habit of doing something, we almost do it without thinking.

Notice how Paul also wants us to know there's a reward associated with spiritual training. Just as physical training has some value and reward for this life, godliness and the training it requires have value both for this life and the life to come. Paul is so sure of this he says, "This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance." And Paul isn't just saying this as one on the sidelines cheering them on as they grind it out. He's in training too. He's looking to that eternal reward too. He says, "That is why we labor and strive because we have put our hope in the living God..."

So Paul says physical training is valuable, but spiritual training even more so. Perhaps it's worth asking, what do I spend more time doing, physical training or spiritual training? Fifty-eight million Americans have a gym membership. Health clubs rake in \$21.8 billion per year in revenues. We see the value of physical training, but do we spend as much on our spiritual training?

Most of all, I'm struck by how godliness and the training that goes with it have value for this life as well as the next. It's not all pain and no gain. There's real value in this life. In what ways? Let's say one of the ways you train is by practicing something the Bible calls Sabbath. The idea of Sabbath is to take one day in seven as a day of rest and worship. I can think of numerous benefits of this practice in life. It's good for your own physical health because you're not stressed out from work 24-7. It's good for your marriage because you're spending time with your spouse. It's good for your children because they're getting your undivided attention. If you run a business, it's good for your employees because you're giving them a day of rest too.

I've been reading book called, *Subversive Sabbath*, by A.J. Swoboda and in it he says,

**"When we keep a Sabbath, our entire existence begins to experience ripple effects of rest. We sleep better. We are more awake with the people we are with. We have more energy. We pay close attention to being people of gratitude. In other words, we enter into peace. In a way, the Sabbath has a kind of healing effect on our lives."**

Get this: Seventh Day Adventists, who are very rigid about observing the Sabbath on Saturdays, live ten years longer than the North American life expectancy. As Paul said, "godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come."

So, we should ask, what are these practices that become habits that shape us towards godliness? One of the habits I've already mentioned — immersing yourself in reading, study, meditation, and memorization of God's Word. I've also mentioned Sabbath. But what are some others?

At the top of the list is prayer. The Bible says to be "faithful in prayer" (Rom. 12:12), "devote yourself to prayer" (Col. 4:2), "pray continually" (1 Thess. 5:17), and "pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests" (Eph. 6:18). Of course, asking for things is just a small part of it. C.S. Lewis wrote,

**"Prayer in the sense of petition, asking for things, is a small part of it; confession and penitence are its threshold, adoration its sanctuary, the presence and vision and enjoyment of God its bread and wine."**

Prayer is both a personal practice and a corporate practice. Jesus told us to go into our closet and shut the door and pray to our

Father in secret. But in the book of Acts, it says of the early church, "They all joined together constantly in prayer" (Acts 1:14). Part of what we do here on Sunday mornings is pray together. You also do that in your small groups and hopefully as a family.

There are so many practices I could talk about here: silence and solitude, fasting, worship, fellowship, celebration, generosity, chastity, and even service can be seen as a spiritual practice. Legalism says we do these things in order to be acceptable to God; the Gospel says we are acceptable to God; therefore, we do these things. Legalism says we do these things in our own strength. The Gospel says we do these things because God is at work in us through the Holy Spirit.

All of these practices sound hard, and they do require effort, but they actually make becoming like Jesus easier. Spiritual formation is not a matter of trying harder, but of training wisely. One of the most dangerous traps we can fall into is ignoring the effect that our daily habits and weekly rhythms have on our spiritual growth. That's why Sunday mornings alone aren't enough. One hour or so on a Sunday isn't enough to counter the effect of the other for nearly six days. In some sense, you're the cumulative effect of your daily habits and decisions that give shape to your heart.

How would it go if you sit down tomorrow at a grand piano in front of a packed concert hall trying to play Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 5? That is really hard, so it wouldn't go well. But if you spent years practicing scales and chord progressions, it would come much easier. Spiritual formation, becoming like Jesus, is not a matter of trying harder, but of training wisely. Are you training? Are you practicing the practices?

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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