

## 11. Attitudes of the Heart – Self-Discipline

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It is not uncommon to hear preachers and evangelist exhort Christians to “surrender” to God or to “lay it all on the altar”. These phrases are not bad or unbiblical per se, but they tend to paint a picture of a passive approach to spiritual growth. The Apostle Paul (who was clearly “surrendered to God” Gal 2:20) used much different language in describing how a Christian should live out his discipleship. Look up 1 Cor 9:24-27.

 v24-25. **Q.** What is Paul comparing our spiritual walk to?

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**Q.** v26. What else does he compare it to in verse 26?

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The Corinthians were thoroughly familiar with sporting events as their city was host to the Isthmian games, an Olympic-style sporting event held each year before and after the Olympics. The average Corinthian would have been keenly aware of the discipline and stamina required for a man to succeed at the games. Paul uses their familiarity with sporting events to help them understand the discipline necessary to succeed in the Christian life. He describes himself as a runner in a race who has a prize in his sights or a professional boxer who makes contact with each of his blows.


**Q.** v29. How did Paul’s self-discipline affect his relationship with his physical body?

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**Q.** What was his motivation for bringing his body into subjection?

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The phrases “keep under” and “bring it into subjection” literally mean to “subdue” or “make a slave”. In Paul’s mind, in order to be a spiritual success it required that he become the master of his own flesh and it’s desires and not the other way around.

 **Discuss.** What fleshly tendencies do you think we must be in control of in order to be a spiritual success?

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### **Self-Discipline – A Mark of Discipleship**

An integral part of self-discipline is the idea of “self-denial”. We live in a society where self-denial has given way to indulgence and instant gratification. There is no need, in our affluent society, to go without

or to deny ourselves anything. But that should not prevent the Christian from practicing self-denial. The disciplined Christian will learn to deny himself pleasures and indulgences, not only to protect his spiritual walk, but to ensure that he is in constant control of his flesh and not his flesh in control of him. This denial of self is a mark of a true disciple of Jesus Christ.

📖 Matt 16:24. **Q.** What did Jesus say that a man should do to “self” if he desired to be His disciple?

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📖 Gal 5:24. **Q.** What is a characteristic of those who “are Christ’s”?

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📖 Rom 13:13-14. **Q.** How should “putting on Christ” affect the way we treat our flesh?

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To be a disciple of Christ one must be willing to crucify himself. To give his life, his own desires and his own priorities over to the control of Jesus Christ. But giving control over to Jesus Christ is not an act of passivity. It involves the constant, day-by-day subjection of our own bodies to our control as we are led by the Spirit of God.

## Motivations for Self-Discipline

### 1. Seeking The Best

A lot of Christians spend their life trying to find the fine line between liberty and sin. Once they find that line they spend the rest of their lives in the precarious position of trying to walk that line without falling full-on into sin. Paul had a different perspective. He not only abstained from out-and-out sin but also avoided anything that had even the *potential* to control or hinder him.

📖 1 Cor 6:12-13. **Q.** What did Paul say was true about “all things”?

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**Q.** v12. What is not true about all things?

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It is true that the Christian will be forgiven of every sin if he sincerely repents, asking God’s forgiveness (1 John 1:9). But this is not a license to sin (Rom 6:1-2, 1 Peter 2:16). The question then that all Christian’s should be asking themselves is not “is it wrong”, but rather “is it beneficial to my spiritual growth”. This question raises our concern regarding spiritual life to a whole new level. It is deciding that although something is not necessarily sinful, it is not *best* for me. Paul was willing to forsake all (Php 3:8) if it meant that he would gain a greater knowledge of God and experience the power of his resurrection (Php 3:10). Like the olympic runner, he was running to win and would not allow anything to hold him back, even if it was not technically sinful.

Paul's desire to discipline himself and to avoid anything that might hurt his spiritual life is a great mark of spiritual maturity. Whereas the spiritually immature often conform to the prevailing standards of a church out of obligation, the spiritually mature willingly limit their liberty in order to protect the precious relationship they have with God. Paul's motivation for self-discipline was not to please people, to fit in, or to earn God's favour, but to ensure that he would not become a spiritual failure. As such, true self-discipline starts in the heart. It is motivated by sincere desire to live a life close to God and to encourage others to do the same. It is this same desire that should motivate us to discipline ourselves.


## 2. Encouraging The Brethren

 1 Cor 10:23. **Q.** In this passage Paul repeats what he has already said in 1 Cor 6 but adds a phrase. What else should we take into consideration when deciding whether or not something is right to take part in?

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To edify simply means *to build up*. Paul not only exhorted the churches to build up one another (Rom 14:19; Rom 15:2; 1 Cor 8:1; 1 Cor 14; Eph 4:12; Eph 4:29; 1 Thess 5:11), but he himself was always conscious as to whether or not his actions would be a benefit or a stumbling block to his fellow Christians (1 Cor 8:13; 2 Cor 12:19).

The eighth chapter of Corinthians is a wonderful example of Paul's willingness to deny his own flesh for the sake of others. He was willing to abstain from eating meat offered to idols if it meant the edification of the brethren.

 **Discuss.** What are some things that we might avoid entirely for the sake of weaker Christians even though they are not necessarily sinful?

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## 3. Avoiding Bondage

**Q.** Look back at 1 Cor 6:12. What did Paul say he would not allow to happen?

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Paul understood that although we are under grace and not the law, not all things were beneficial for us. He also understood that not all things edify or build up the brethren. Further still, he understood that there are some things that are not necessarily sinful but have the potential to bring us into bondage. For all of these reasons he was willing to discipline his body and to bring it under his control.

Would you give your child a box of chocolates and trust them to only eat as much as is healthy? Or would you give them a limit knowing that they have a tendency to overindulge? Not unlike that child our flesh tends toward indulgence. And left unchecked, indulgence can lead to bondage.

How can you tell if you have become the servant of something that used to just be a harmless enjoyment? It might help to ask yourself the following questions:

- Does this thing occupy an inordinate amount of my thought life?
- Does this thing prevent me from accomplishing important tasks?
- Have I begun to sacrifice social interaction, family life or friendships in favour of this thing?
- Have I changed my social circle to one which revolves around this thing?
- Do I spend an inappropriate amount of time, money or resources on this thing?
- Have I become embarrassed or secretive about this thing?
- Do I become irritated or angry when someone I love prevents me from taking part in this thing?
- Have I tried to stop or limit this thing only to fail repeatedly?

There are some habits which are out-and-out sinful like drugs, alcohol and pornography but what about other things like food, entertainment and social media? These (and just about anything else) can be done in excess, thus creating a habit and bringing us unto bondage. Each individual ought to consider what it is in their lives that tends to bring them into bondage and then seek to moderate or abstain from those things.


 Heb 12:1. Q. In Hebrews 11 we see a list of great men and women of faith. Following this list in chapter 12 the writer of Hebrews encourages us to follow their example. What two things does the writer tell us we should “lay aside”?

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Q. What will laying aside these things help us to do?

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Remember, we started by looking at Paul’s analogy in 1 Cor 9 of an olympic runner. Here we are told that in order to successfully run this race we must lay aside, not only sin, but everything that weighs us down. Everything that produces an unnecessary burden upon us, that distracts and hinders us from focusing on the things of God.

 **Discuss.** What are some other things that are OK in moderation but are unhealthy in excess?

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## Learning Moderation – The Key to Self Discipline

 **Q.** Considering 1 Cor 9:25 again, What approach must a serious athlete take toward “all things”?


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To be “temperate” means to exercise self-restraint. Webster’s 1828 dictionary has it this way: “*Moderation; particularly, habitual moderation in regard to the indulgence of the natural appetites and passions;*”. Let’s consider some things that prevent us from practicing moderation.

### 1. Enemies of Moderation – Laziness

Moderation involves harnessing our appetites and guarding against extremes in everything we do. Moderation requires a consistent assessment of our behaviour and because it requires consistency it is very difficult for the lazy or undisciplined person to practice.

Laziness is itself an act of extremism. It is over indulging in sleep, relaxation, entertainment etc. The moderate will practice a reasonable bedtime and waking time (Prov 6:9-11). He will discipline himself to do all things with reasonableness, avoiding extremes in every area, including food and rest.

 **Discuss.** How can physical laziness affect our spiritual life?

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### 2. Legalism

Another enemy of moderation is *legalism*. The legalist seeks discipline or temperance through the rigid adherence to rules.

The legalist is prone to extreme swings in his spiritual devotion. When he finds himself over-indulging his flesh he will make some new rule or extreme decision to abstain from something that is not necessarily sinful. His lack of moderation leads him to make unnecessary rules. Unlike Paul, the legalist seeks to control himself, not from an inward desire to succeed spiritually, but from the outward pressure of a set of laws.

The legalist is prone to extremism in every area. He can swing from over-indulgence in the flesh to extreme decisions for God, and back to his flesh. He is the one who has “rededicated” his life to God countless times but never seems to stick to it. He has never learned moderation.

One doesn't have to be a legalist to act like one. Sometimes the lazy, undisciplined, unorganized Christian can get fed up with their inconsistency and as a result make drastic decisions in their life in an effort to get their spiritual life in order. These folks decide to get rid of their TV's when they spend too much time watching. They cancel their internet access to combat their obsessive surfing. They start an extreme diet when their eating is out of control. And, within a week or two they are out shopping for another TV, reconnecting their internet and back to their old eating habits. Why? Because the extremism that was behind their lack of spirituality is the same extremism that drove their spike in spiritual interest. What this Christian needs is not more “decisions for God” or more rules. They need to learn self-discipline.

### **3. Libertinism**

The libertine is one who is not at all concerned with moderation. He feels that since he is “under grace”, he need not worry about self-discipline. He indulges his flesh, figuring he can simply ask God's forgiveness if he stumbles into sin. His overarching concern is not “knowing God and the power of his resurrection”, but getting as much satisfaction out of this life as he can.

#### **Learning Moderation - The Key to Genuine Liberty**

Ironically, it is not the lazy, the legalist or the libertine that experiences the most liberty. It is the moderate. The Christian who has learned to handle his appetites with moderation is free to experience all sorts of things that the lazy extremist or the legalist cannot. Because the moderate, like Paul, has learned “not be brought under the power of any”, he can enjoy things that the lazy extremist or the legalist could not handle (1 Cor 8).

While the lazy extremist is in bondage to something and the legalist is making new rules to govern the use of that thing, the self-disciplined Christian is enjoying it in moderation. Whether it be entertainment, food, social media, sports, hobbies or anything else, the self-disciplined person can enjoy them all without fear of bondage. He has learned what is reasonable and enjoys them only to that extent.

#### **Conclusion**

Essential to the Christian life is self-discipline. At the moment we became a disciple of Christ we entered into a lifestyle of self-denial and discipline. Paul understood this well and even likened it to the disciplined life of an Olympic athlete. We do not work for salvation, or to earn God's favour, but we do work diligently to avail ourselves to the tools which God has given us for spiritual growth (His word, prayer, fellowship, preaching, etc). We also work diligently to protect our spiritual life by abstaining from sin and by doing everything else in moderation.

The Christian walk is one of consistent discipline. When we consistently pray, read God's word, and apply it, we will see growth. But the hit-and-miss, inconsistent, Christian who swings between extremes of devotion and apathy will never make much spiritual progress.