

## Session 1

January 24, 2021

### THE BENEFIT OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

#### 1 Timothy 4:1-10

We often associate the word “discipline” with negative connotations. A naughty child needs to be “disciplined.” An unruly soldier needs to learn “discipline.” But the root word (derived from Latin) refers to *knowledge* or *instruction* and includes the *application* of that knowledge. A *disciple*, then, is someone who follows the instructions.

While the word “discipline” does not always infer punishment, it does involve following certain rules or guidelines. The goal of discipline is to apply rules to live by, making life simpler and more purposeful. Spiritual disciplines, then, are guidelines for living based on God’s instructions. When applied, spiritual disciplines make us more purposeful and more effective followers of Christ.

In the focal passage this week, the apostle Paul reminds Timothy of the importance of spiritual discipline. Three benefits are mentioned.

**Discipline protects (vv. 1-3).** After expressing the basis of Christian faith so succinctly at the end of the previous chapter (see 1 Tim. 3:16), Paul described the travesty of apostasy that would one day arrive. The victims would be those led astray by spirits that deceive, demons that proclaim false doctrines (v. 1), and hypocrites that bear false witness without remorse; their consciences deadened like flesh cauterized (*seared*) by a hot iron (v. 3). Those on the fringe of faith would institute certain practices they erroneously thought would promote a form of godliness (see 2 Tim. 3:1-7): celibacy and dietary restrictions (such as vegetarianism). While many of the world’s religions practice some type of asceticism, these practices entered the Christian church and continue today in the form of monks and nuns who populate monasteries. While some revere them as particularly holy, two questions must be asked. First, does the Bible command such things? And second, what contribution does asceticism make to God’s kingdom while monks and nuns cloister behind monastery walls? Spiritual discipline—believing and knowing God’s truth and living by it—protects believers from those who deceive (v. 3). For reflection: *Can you think of other “rules and regulations” that some Christians follow that aren’t biblical? How might you lovingly guide the errant back into biblical faith?*

**Discipline proclaims (vv. 4-7).** A common axiom is, “Nothing succeeds quite like success.” Those who pursue a disciplined spiritual life are the most successful in living out a spiritual life. And those who succeed are best equipped to train others. Here, Paul reminds Timothy that simple biblical principles should be pointed out by the devout to those who stray into false teachings. The immediate context concerns the celibacy and selective diet mentioned in verse 3. But the context is expanded in verse 4 to cover “everything created by God;” as long as it is received with thanksgiving (v. 4) and used as God intended (v. 5; see also James 1:17). Pointing out such simple truths to the brethren is pleasing to the Lord and evidence of true faith and obedience to His word (v. 6). Whereas the apostate follows “irreverent and silly myths” the faithful are to be disciplined “in godliness” (v. 7). For reflection: *What are some areas in your own life that need to be “trained in godliness?” What resources do we have to help us live disciplined spiritual lives?*

**Discipline preserves (vv. 8-10).** Health clubs are booming as our society idolizes physical health and appearance. Certainly, a healthy lifestyle is important. But its benefit is limited to this life. Spiritual health, the apostle points out, is beneficial for this life (see Matt. 6:33; John 10:10) and the next; for it is through spiritual salvation that the body will ultimately be saved (v. 8). That “God is the Savior of everyone” is not a Pauline universalism, but rather the idea that all the blessings of life come from God. And while even the lost enjoy the benefits of a life that God gives, only those committed to Christ fully understand and experience the essence of true life; both here and in eternity (see John 1:4). For reflection: *Do you put as much effort in your spiritual condition as your physical condition?*