

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

## Train Yourself in Godliness

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Genesis 1:26-31

1 Timothy 4

Have you ever put yourself through a training period? A time of physical activity with a definite goal in mind: maybe you want to be able to cycle in a certain distance race, or run a marathon, or be strong enough to better your best at a lifting or throwing event, or become faster or able to jump further for a particular sporting occasion. Or maybe you have put yourself into training just because you have seen that you are less fit than you used to be, and you want to be able to climb the stairs without puffing! One thing is sure though - the results of training are good and healthy, but they don't come just by thinking about things. They require hard work. Today we are thinking about a different kind of training, but which is also not going to happen just of itself, it is going to need work.

"Physical training is of some value," says Paul, but "godliness is valuable in every way." And so he tells Timothy to train himself in godliness. It seems a tall order. Godliness - being like God. It's as tough as when Jesus tells us that we must be perfect just as God is perfect - impossible. But this part of Paul's letter to Timothy gives some hints about what in practical terms this training will look like and what will be the consequences.

First of all it means looking at things in God's way, deliberately setting out to find God's way of regarding every part of life. In the first few verses of the chapter Paul is talking about people who do not look at things in God's way: people who deny the inherent goodness of God's creation. They probably don't actually say that, of course. But they do it in action when they not only deny themselves in one way or another, but try to enforce various kinds of abstaining rules on others. Paul talks of them forbidding marriage and certain foods.

It's a funny thing, but those who want to show that they are holier than thou very often take the road of self-denial, ostentatious self-denial. Now it is not wrong for a person who has a problem with one area of life or another to deny themselves. It is better to do that than to let your greed - of whatever kind - lead you into sin. So if alcohol is something you find hard to say "stop" to when you should, or if your gluttony is biscuits or chocolate, it may be that you have to just deny yourself the thing altogether if it is not to rule your life. Remember only God should rule and be in charge. The same goes if your temptation is to be ruled by other desires and lusts of the body.

But that is just you, coping with *your* flaws and history, and trying to be right before God. Paul has no truck with those who would make their weakness into rules for others and attach merit to the keeping of them. Isn't that just the kind of law that Jesus set us free from? No, everything God made is good. If there is one thing which the story of creation in Genesis tells us, it is that what God made is good. And God made the world for the benefit and pleasure of humanity. That doesn't mean we don't have a responsibility to take care of it: of course we do, or it won't be able to function to provide for us as God intended. But it also means that if we are to think like God, to train ourselves in godliness this way, we should take delight in all that he has given us. That is partly what we focused on last week at our Harvest Thanksgiving.

So godliness is thinking God's way. And we do have to make a conscious effort to do this. It won't just happen. When we hear the comment of the world on any situation, we need to ask ourselves, what would God, who made everything good, think? By the way, we might not always come up with the right answer, but at least if you're doing the training you will be getting stronger and more skilled at it.

Godliness means being like God - where we can. But it also means focusing on God and on Jesus his Son. Jesus, indeed, shows us how godliness can look in human form. Paul is worried that Timothy and those he

leads may be led astray and have their focus shifted by the enticing distractions of genealogy and speculative stories. That has always been a temptation for Christian people. Many hours have been wasted trying, by various means of Scripture study and numerology, to predict the date of the second coming. The end of the first millennium was one popular answer, until it came and went. Emmanuel Swedenborg set it for 1757, George Rapp taught that it would be September 15th 1829, while the Jehovah's witnesses say that it happened in 1914. I once met a man who was working out his own date for the event based on his theory that the first chapters in every book of the Bible were about the same thing, and the second chapters and so on. Meaningless speculation.

It's easy to laugh at it, but unless we make the effort to fix our eyes on God through Jesus, then we could easily be led into the wilderness of superstition and old wives tales before we realise it. Training takes effort. Many people nowadays would like to think that being Christian is a vague spirituality, which they equate with feeling good, peaceful or happy. Following Jesus may well give you times of feeling good, peaceful and happy, but that's a by-product, not the end in itself, and training in godliness takes work. To keep our eyes on Jesus we need to devote ourselves to his word and to prayer. That means reading the Bible intelligently, and praying with discipline (first of all for leaders, remember).

Paul reminds Timothy that this is going to take work. He quotes another popular saying, which is specific about this. *For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe.* (v:10) Godliness is a struggle. There is a lot of saving going on, after all. We are being saved, transformed into God's image, and it is like a sculptor making an image. Not an image in some soft material like soap, which you can mould with just a little hot water and bare hands; we are being moulded the way that marble is crafted, by chipping away flakes from a block of stone to reveal the unseen pattern. We are being saved, and the nearer we get to showing the image of God to the world the nearer the chipping away will come to our hearts.

But there's also a world out there that needs saving. Jesus came so that the whole world would be changed by his having lived among us, by his having died for us and by his being resurrected again. If the world is unaffected by Christ's followers living and growing in godliness, then we have failed. So effort is required. As we grow in godliness our concentration will be less and less on ourselves. We will focus on God, and Jesus, and in doing so we will see his focus on reaching out and saving people from the effects of sin. That means both telling others the good news that God loves them and wants to forgive and transform them, but also doing our best to save those affected by the imbalance of trade, the injustice of power, the effects of violence, and the natural and unnatural disasters which overwhelm at different times.

So how is your training programme going? Perhaps other people are the best judges of the outcome of it, but only you and God know how disciplined you are in seeking to be the person he wants you to be. Only you and God know if you have practised thinking his way and receiving the good gifts of life with simple joy, which doing you best to care for the world which God has made for us. Only you and God know if you spend your times of prayer and devotion seeking his face, concentrating on him, rather than being distracted by side-issues.

Only you and God know how you are letting him inspire you to live and work to take the saving work of Christ to others, near and far away, in your actions, choices, words and priorities. "Pay close attention to yourself" Paul urges Timothy. We need to keep a monitor on ourselves. We need to make sure that we are focussing on God and using the gifts which he has given us to help in the work of the church, which is the work of Christ. Maybe this would be a good week to give yourself a spiritual health-check. And where you find that there is flabbiness or weakness, put yourself into training. For "godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come."

Amen.