Training towards Godliness

‘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.’ 1 Timothy 4: 7-8 (NIV)

‘Exercise daily in God – no spiritual flabbiness, please! Workouts in the gymnasium are useful, but a disciplined life in God is far more so, making you fit both today and forever.’ 1 Timothy 4: 7-8 (MSG)

In two short weeks, thousands of athletes from hundreds of countries around the world will stream into London to take part in the 2012 Olympic Games. The anticipation of spectators will increase over the next few days leading up to the Opening Ceremonies, which an estimated four billion people will watch. For the city of London, preparations have been in the making since 2005, when they received the bid to host this year’s Olympic Games. However, for the multitude of competitors, the road to these Games began long before then; years and years of training have led to this moment in time.

An Olympic athlete puts *hours* of training into his sport – his diet is affected, his life revolves around his sport. She is disciplined in all aspects of her life to improve at her sport. That discipline is what separates them from the rest of us. I could hardly be considered an athlete. Occasionally, I will go for a run – however, those runs are sporadic and do not last for long. I barely qualify to participate in 5-kilometer fun runs; the Olympics are completely out of the question. It would be ridiculous of me to expect to be a great runner without the adequate amount of training.

Paul, in this letter, advises Timothy to train himself to be godly. (In other translations of this verse, the verbs ‘exercise’ and ‘discipline’ are used in place of the word ‘train.’) He acknowledges the benefits of physical training, but asserts that godly living (or, godliness) has value in all things – both in our present life and in eternity.

For authentic godliness, we as Christians need to train ourselves just as an athlete does. Athletic training is good – it keeps us healthy and physically fit, which allows us to work harder and enjoy life more. But disciplining ourselves in godliness is even more valuable. It allows us to become ‘spiritually fit,’ and the kind of person who is a reflection of God.

This, however, is not what most people today want to hear. We don’t like the idea that we have to work hard and train – we would rather take a shortcut. We want immediate results, with as little work as possible. But there isn’t a shortcut to godliness, or to anything of value that will bring change in our lives. Any claims to quick fixes or shortcuts are merely the ‘godless myths and old wives’ tales’ that Paul warns about in 1 Timothy 4:7.

Olympic athletes train their muscles in order to build up their strength and endurance. This doesn’t happen over a couple of days, or even a couple of

months. Christians exercise their faith in God by trusting and relying on him – not just occasionally, but continually, every day. This is the way to build up our spiritual strength and endurance.

Godliness requires discipline, and discipline is tough. Richard S. Taylor, in The Disciplined Life, says that 'discipline is what we need the most and want the least.' We can be our own worst enemies when it comes to discipline. The only thing keeping me from exercising daily is myself. Athletes make the choice to devote hours each day to training – and they stick with that commitment. We as Christians must similarly make our pursuit of a godly life a priority and train daily.

There are several types of spiritual exercises you can participate in to train yourself towards godliness. In his book The Spirit of the Disciplines, Dallas Williard categorizes several disciplines as 'Disciplines of Abstinence' and 'Disciplines of Engagement.' Disciplines of Abstinence require us to give something up. Examples of these activities include Fasting, Solitude, Silence, Chastity, and Frugality. Removing things from our life creates time and energy to pursue disciplines of engagement. Disciplines of Engagement require action on our part. These can include Study, Worship, Service, Prayer, and Fellowship. When we practice Disciplines of Abstinence and take an activity out of our lives, we should be keen to engage in a healthy and beneficial activity (Disciplines of Engagement) in its place. It is important to balance both types of disciplines in our spiritual exercises.

Lastly, athletes know that the end result of their training qualifies them to compete. Because of all their years of training, the Olympic athletes are ready to compete this year, and the best will be awarded medals for their accomplishment. Christians who exercise themselves towards godliness will be 'workers who do not need to be ashamed' (2 Timothy 2:15). We have already been given everything we need to achieve godliness, if we train ourselves in getting to know our Father in Heaven. 'His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.' (2 Peter 1:3) The training that the athletes are disciplined in is only valuable in the present life, but disciplined Christians receive benefits for living godly lives both today and forever.

Godliness is the purpose that we are meant to pursue. We are called to be more like Jesus, and to be holy as he is holy. Everything else flows out of that. Jesus is our example. Anything else is worthless and distracting, if it takes away from our priority of pursuing God.

Are you disciplining yourself daily in pursuing a life of godliness? What exercises are you doing to strengthen your 'spiritual muscles'?

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