

## 1 TIM 4:7b-16—SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

**INTRO:** Most people—certainly all Christians—would like to act and live in a way that pleases God. But most of us—actually, all of us, I think—know that there is a divide between what we are on the inside and how we usually present ourselves on the outside. We know the pettiness, the prejudice, the hatreds, the lusts, the anger, and all the rest of how we are inside. We can do a pretty good job of hiding it most of the time. But it's there.

This is an aspect of a related issue. As I see it, there are three main axes or dimensions that make up each person: knowing, doing, and being. All three axes are interrelated and affect each other. Knowing, of course, is what we have learned, what we believe, and what we know. The doing axis is how we spend our time; what we do for a living; how we act; what we do. Many of us have been or are quite accomplished and successful in our particular fields. This is an area where we feel reasonably comfortable. We know things that other people don't, or if we are talking with others in our field, we all share a common language.

If you meet someone at a party, after asking their name, what's the first thing that people typically ask? **“What do you do for a living?”** Many people pretty much define themselves by what they do. I was a lawyer for 28 years. Even though it's been over 17 years since I quit the practice of law, went to theological school, and now teach pastors and church leaders in East Africa, I am still largely a lawyer at heart.

But then there is the “being” axis. IOW, who are we “really”? What are we like on the inside? Who is the “real me.” For many of us there is a big divide, or we feel a big divide between our doing side and who we really are—our being side. Related to this is what is called the “impostor syndrome,” which is the internal experience of feeling like a phony in some area of our life, despite any success that we have achieved. And for Christians there is always the realization that, while man looks at the outside, God looks at the heart. So if people ever say how wonderful we are, I'm thinking, **“If you only knew what I'm really like.”**

How can we bring our inner life into conformity with our outer life? How can we be truly godly people, inside and out? **Rom 8:29** says that, in essence, the whole point of our lives is **“to be conformed into the image of Jesus Christ.”** That means to think the way he thinks, feel the way he feels, speak the way he speaks, act the way he acts; his values become our values; and his priorities become our priorities. There was no discrepancy between his “being” axis and his “doing” axis, or between his inner self and his outer self. How can we be like that?

1 Tim 4:7b-16 points us to how we can be like that ourselves. This passage tells us that:

**PROP: A godly life requires spiritual discipline.**

**O/S:** This passage is in two sections: **vv. 7b-10** deal with spiritual discipline in general; then **vv. 11-16** set forth the “ten commandments” of spiritual discipline.

### **I. vv. 7b through 10: spiritual discipline in general [READ].**

This passage begins by contrasting physical discipline and spiritual discipline. When Paul says that physical discipline **“is only of little profit,”** he is not denigrating physical discipline, but is simply comparing the relative value of physical versus spiritual discipline. It's kind of like in the parable of the talents. One talent of silver was the equivalent of about 20 years' worth of wages. In the parable, the master gives one of his stewards 5 talents or about 100 years' worth of wages. Yet at the end of the parable he says, **“you have been faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things.”** IOW, compared to eternity, even an outrageous amount of wealth is “little.”

Or, as Jesus said in Luke 14, “If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple.” He is *not* saying that we have to emotionally despise our families and ourselves and say **“Mother, I can't stand you.”** No. We all love ourselves and hopefully love our parents, our children, and our siblings. This is a Hebrew idiom of comparison. What he is saying is, **“Compared to the great love you have for your family and yourself, that should be as if it were hatred compared to your love for me.”** IOW, Jesus is of infinite value compared to even the most loved and valued relationships and things here on earth. In **1 Timothy**, the point is that, although physical discipline is important for living a healthy life, spiritual discipline is of immeasurably greater value because it relates to **“the present life and also the life to come.”**

“Discipline” implies regularity and effort. There is a goal involved. Several years ago, Nancy and I started reading about diet and nutrition. As a result, we significantly changed our diet: we cut out or cut way down on processed foods, simple carbs, sugar, and dairy. While we still eat meat, a plant-based diet is the heart of our diet. We try to buy organic and use a fair amount of spices, because all kinds of studies show that a plant-based diet is by far the healthiest. That is where most of the nutrition is, and there are lots of nutritional and even medicinal properties in spices. I also have a regular exercise routine I do each morning. As a result, we both lost 35-40 pounds, we are healthier, look and feel better, and I think we now have greater internal reserves for warding off and fighting off illness. Our knowing affected our doing which affected our being.

Just as a footnote, you might want to check out the book *How Not to Die* and the *How Not to Die Cookbook*. They discuss these things in a compelling way. You can probably find them at the library.

Since physical diet and exercise have such great benefits for our physical wellbeing, it should be even more true with respect to spiritual discipline. The goal is godliness, IOW, a truly Christlike, God-honoring life, inside and out. When v. 8 talks about **“the promise for the present life and also for the life to come,”** it is summing up the blessedness of godliness. One commentator summarizes this by saying, **“Irrespective of his present earthly circumstances, the Christian may fairly be said to have the best of both worlds.”** (Guthrie 1990: 107) That is why a spiritually disciplined life is so important.

In v. 10 Paul goes on to say [READ]. When he says, **“For it is for this we labor and strive,”** Paul is again emphasizing that maintaining a life of faith is not easy. In 1:18 he used the boxing or fighting metaphor for remaining faithful, **“fight the good fight.”** In 4:7-8 the Greek term for “discipline” is an athletic metaphor that clearly refers to athletic discipline. Now in v. 10 he uses a double metaphor: **“labor and strive.”** “Labor” is an employment or work metaphor; the term “strive” was associated with athletic contests.

In Phil 2:12-16 Paul uses a similar double metaphor. There he tells us to [READ 2:12-13, 16]. So he talks about working (a work metaphor), running (an athletic metaphor) and toiling (a work metaphor). Even though Christ is with us, and in us, and is leading us, ours is not to be a life of laziness and passivity but of walking, running, working, striving, and persevering in faithfulness.

In v. 10 he then goes on to tell us why we must keep working and striving in faithfulness, **“Because we have fixed our hope on the living God.”** What Paul is saying is almost paradoxical, like he said in Phil 2:12-13 (**“work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure”**): Specifically, we have placed our hope, not on this world or the things of this world, but on God. The “rock” on whom we have “fixed” our hope is secure and trustworthy, not like hope placed on this world or on the things of this world. Our future is secure in him—he has guaranteed all those who are his eternal life.

Since we know that our future is secure, some people become passive and inactive, not caring about how we live here and now. The exact opposite of that should be the case! It is *because* our hope is now on God in Christ and our eternal life is secure in him that we are working hard to become like him. Why should that be?

First, Paul says the fact that we know our future is secure in Christ is the very reason why we should be **“laboring and striving”** to become godly people who do all we can to achieve the goal of love now. The reason is that he has done everything for us to secure our future. As a result, there is no pressure on us. We can live like Christ now and don’t have to worry that if we screw up we have jeopardized our eternal future. This is the great difference between Christianity and every other religion in the world. Every other religion says, **“If you want God to accept you and take you to heaven, it is up to YOU—to work harder, do enough good deeds, and make enough sacrifices.”** The result is that no one has any assurance that God *will* accept them, because we all know we can’t meet even our own standards, let alone God’s. But in Christianity, Christ has done everything *for* us. Therefore, we don’t have to work *for* our salvation—it is a gift from God through Christ—we simply work it out. We work out in our lives the implications of what he already has done for us.

Second, how we live makes a difference both in our present and in our eternal existence. Jesus said **“store up your treasures in heaven; don’t store them up on earth.”** We do that by how we live now: how we treat people; what we do with our money; how we demonstrate love to the poor, the needy, and people in general; and what we do to spread the kingdom of God. Jesus said, **“Even if all you have is a cup of cold water and you give it to someone in need, he sees that, he will reward us at the judgment for it, and his rewards will last forever.”** So he is encouraging us and giving us great incentives to make our everlasting future on the new heaven and new earth as rich and full as possible. He is not standing over our shoulder and saying **“I saw**

**you not give that cup of water to someone—and I’m going to get you for that!”** We will lose the reward which he otherwise would have given us, but our salvation is secure.

Third, if someone goes out of his or her way to bail you out of a very tough situation where you stood to lose bigly—your life, your fortune, your reputation, your job, or anything very dear to you—aren’t we naturally disposed to be incredibly grateful to the one who saved us? We want to be like that person ourself, to never forget them, and do what we can to please them and make them proud of us, because they have given us a new life, so to say. That is exactly what Jesus has done for us, and more. So how can we *not* live in newness of life, striving to be like him, laying aside all the things that we know would displease him?

Paul reinforces this by concluding v. 10 by saying that God “is the Savior of all men, especially of believers.” This last part of v. 10, which singles out believers as objects of God’s saving power, suggests that the word *Savior* is used in a double sense: he both preserves people temporally in this life and redeems people eternally. God is the savior of all people in the sense of being the “preserver.”. That is his “common grace” which gives everyone life and all the abundance of the world to enjoy. As Jesus said, God causes the **“sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust alike.”** On the other hand, he is the savior (in the sense of “eternal salvation”) of his people (namely, believers; the church). Because we are the recipients of this saving grace, how can we *not* spiritually discipline our lives and labor and strive after godliness?

This leads us to the last part of the passage:

## **II. vv. 11-16: the “ten commandments” of spiritual discipline [READ].**

These “10 commands” (or, “imperatives”) show what “spiritual discipline” looks like in the life of the Christian. They are as follows: the first two are in v. 11: (1) “*Prescribe*” (or, “command”) these things; (2) “*Teach*” these things; the next two are in v. 12: (3) “*Let no one look down*” on your youthfulness; (4) “*Show yourself*” an example; number (5) is in v. 13: “*Give attention*” to reading Scripture; number (6) is in v. 14: “*Do not neglect*” your spiritual gift; numbers 7 and 8 are in v. 15: (7) “*Take pains*” with these things; (8) “*Be [absorbed]*” in these things; the last two are in v. 16: (9) “*Pay close attention*” to yourself and your teaching; and (10) “*Persevere*” in these things.

These 10 imperatives may be grouped according to the major themes that Paul has been developing throughout 1 Timothy. Paul has been emphasizing *what we believe and teach* and *the character of our lives*. Through it all, regarding both belief and life, he has been exhorting Timothy to *constancy, faithfulness, and perseverance*. Consequently, commands 1, 2, 5, and 9b (pay close attention to your teaching) all relate primarily to doctrine, belief, or teaching—the knowing axis of life. Commands 3, 4, 6, and 9a (pay close attention to yourself) all relate primarily to character and our way of life—the being axis. Commands 7, 8, 9 as a whole, and 10 all are exhortations to constancy, faithfulness, and perseverance—the doing axis. So let’s briefly go through each of these “10 commandments” of spiritual discipline.

v. 11 begins with “Prescribe (or command) these things.” Paul is saying, “**if you want to become godly—if you want to become conformed into the image of Jesus—these things are not optional.**” He has already talked about laboring and striving. Discipline is a life-long process. Nancy and I did not just change our diet for a week. We have changed it for life. But the amazing thing is: I am not tempted by the sugared garbage I used to eat. And I can tell when I cheat, particularly since I weigh myself every morning. We would *never* go back to the way we were.

Spiritual discipline is similar. It’s developing new habits. Several years ago Nancy and I and a couple of our kids were in Pompeii, Italy. You may recall that Pompeii was destroyed by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in AD 79. They have excavated the town, and one of the things I found fascinating was the houses and the streets were all made of stone. In the middle of the streets were these ruts made from the wheels of carts that would go up and down the streets. Even though the cart wheels were made of wood, over time they wore grooves into the stone streets.

It’s like that with habits. The more you get into a particular habit, the deeper the grooves become and, therefore, the harder it is to get out of the habit. That applies both to bad habits and to good habits. The more we spiritually discipline our lives, the easier it will be to continue and go further and deeper on the road to godliness.

The next command in v. 11 is “teach these things.” Paul repeats “teaching” 3 times, in vv. 11, 13, and 16, at the beginning, middle, and end of his 10 commandments. When a biblical author repeats himself, it is generally to emphasize something important. That is especially so when the same point is found at the beginning, the end, and also in the middle of a list.

Teaching is important, and it implicates all areas of our lives, since Christianity is designed to apply to all areas of our lives. We teach ourselves by reading and studying the Bible and good Christian books. But by its very nature, teaching is for others. We are to pass along to others what we have learned. This can happen in home Bible study groups, or one-on-one get-togethers with people, or in other ways. Be a person of the Word, and use what you learn to edify others.

But remember something important: we teach in two ways—by what we say and by how we live. Which do you think is more important? I think (agree) it is how we live. As we will see, beginning in the very next commands, Paul specifically refers to our life. Throughout the remainder of these commands he intertwines belief and practice, teaching and life.

In v. 12 he says, “Let no one look down” on your youthfulness. Older people naturally tend to “look down on” younger people, because younger people do not tend to have the knowledge and experience that comes with age, or the wisdom that comes with knowledge and experience. Paul’s solution to this problem in v. 12 essentially is that **“character trumps age and experience.”** Consequently, he couples not letting others look down on us with his next command to **“show yourself example to those who believe.”** We are to show ourselves as examples in the essential areas of **“speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity.”** When we do that, all people, even the old, will look up to us.

If a Christian’s Christ-like character shines through in our speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity, even the old will think, “I wish my own son or daughter was like that” or even, “I wish I was more like that myself.” Just as Christ is our example, so we are to be examples to others. Paul’s reference to **“speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity”** shows that all of these things, including how we speak, act, and our sexual lives, are spiritual. IOW, everything about life, at root, is spiritual. And how we live reveals who our true Lord is and who or what we really worship.

In v. 13, the next command is “Give attention” to reading Scripture. The context implies the public reading of Scripture. Paul couples this command to give attention to reading Scripture with exhortation and teaching. Our authority is God’s Word, the Bible. People need to be exhorted *what* to do, but also need to be taught *why* and *how* to do it. If they do not clearly *understand* what the Bible says, we cannot expect them to *do* what it says.

Then in v. 14 he says, “Do not neglect” your spiritual gift. Everyone has been given one or more spiritual gifts. Do you know what yours are? This is important, because in **1 Corinthians 12**, Paul talks about spiritual gifts and analogizes them to the parts of a human body. His point is that the body needs all its parts operating as they are designed, in order to be to be fully functional.

It’s the same in the church. It’s not just those in formal leadership who have spiritual gifts, but everyone. If you are not using your gifts, it’s like a person with one eye closed, one arm tied behind his back, and one leg tied behind his back. A person like that can do some things, but can’t do a lot and can’t do anything very well. We need to open both eyes and free up both arms and both legs. Then the body—the church—can act as God designed it to.

v. 15 has two related commands, “Take pains” with these things, and “Be [absorbed]” in them. The Greek word translated “take pains” carries with it the idea of **“improve by care or study,” “practice,” “cultivate,”** and also the idea of **“fix the mind on,” “think about,” “meditate on.”** Our whole being—body, mind, and soul—needs to be involved if we are to become the kind of people God wants (and expects) us to be.

That is driven home in the next command which literally says “be in” these things. Once again, the Bible and Christianity are not designed to be one-day-a-week things. They are the most wonderful things in the world. Christ, the gospel, his Word, and his body the church, should be our consuming passions. Growing in godliness—like growing in anything else in life—takes time, effort, work, passion, and absorption. But it is worth it.

He closes the verse by saying we need to take pains and be absorbed in these things “so that your progress will be evident to all.” In saying this, Paul is implicitly promising that our progress *will* be evident to all. One of the things we should therefore assess—and talk about with our spouse and others—is whether he, she, or they see any progress in our life; any smoothing of the rough edges of our life; any becoming more like Jesus in speech, conduct, and character. We will never perfectly be “**conformed into his image**” in this life—but slowly-by-slowly we and others should see progress.

If we or they do not see such progress, there is something drastically wrong. We need to find out *what* that is, and *why* it is, and correct it. That may involve getting counsel or outside help. But it is a matter of first importance.

In v. 16 commandment 9 says, “Pay close attention”: 9A says “pay close attention to yourself” and 9B says “pay close attention to your teaching.” A Christian’s real authority ultimately resides in the Word of God. However, if our own life is not in conformity with the Word, then no one will believe us when we talk to them about Jesus. Our lives must correspond with what we say. We cannot “exhort” or “teach” others to do anything that we are not doing ourselves. If we say all the right words, but our own lives do not measure up to what we are saying, then the testimony of our own lives will drown out what we say. On the other hand, if we are not particularly gifted speakers, but our own lives shine forth as excellent examples of Christ-like character, then God will use that to enliven our words, and our hearers will understand, believe, and follow us to Christlikeness.

Paul closes the 10 commandments of spiritual discipline by saying “persevere in these things.” We are in this for the long haul, and that long haul is our entire life. But he then adds a promise, “**for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.**” Spiritual discipline leading to godliness is of supreme importance because the ultimate end is salvation; eternal life; eternity itself. We can have all the money, power, fame, sex, beauty, great family, job—everything—but if we are not saved they are all ashes and ultimately worthless.

As he has previously indicated, our spiritual discipline and godliness are not only for ourselves, but influence others. We are always either drawing people closer to Christ or pushing them away. We may not be able to see it ourselves, but no one is neutral and no one stays neutral. When I was practicing law, I had the good fortune to read books by, and attend seminars by, Herb Stern, who I think is the best trial advocacy teacher there is. One of the things he pointed out is that no one stays neutral for any longer than he or she has to. If you are watching a boxing match or a football game on TV, and you know nothing about the fighters or the teams, we naturally will choose sides early on.

We need to realize that something similar happens in our interactions with people. They will be evaluating us. If they are not Christians, they will be evaluating us to see inconsistencies in our character and in our lives. And we need to realize that they have an interest in finding those inconsistencies. Since they are not Christians, they don’t want to change. They may not be able to articulate this, but what is happening is that, when they see inconsistencies in us—selfishness and self-centeredness, lack of forgiveness, stinginess, or other such things—they will mentally say, “**There is no reason I should become a Christian; he or she is no different from me or from the nonChristians I know.**” Since our lives spiritually influence others, and since our lives have everlasting implications and effects, our lives are *infinitely* more important than we realize. That is why spiritually disciplining our lives for godliness is of infinite importance.

**CONCL:** A godly life requires spiritual discipline. Because all of life, at root, is spiritual, spiritual discipline, as Paul has laid it out in this passage, comprehends all of life: the knowing, doing, and being axes that compose our lives. If we become models of faithfulness to Christ, we and those we influence will be kept safe from the damaging influence of false teachers and false teaching. We will also be God’s instruments to lead others toward Christ and Christlikeness.

These things have eternal implications; therefore, they are of infinite importance. God has given his church awesome responsibility regarding the souls and eternal destinies of men and women. It is the highest calling one could have. It requires that all aspects of our lives—our knowing, doing, and being axes—remain faithful to God and to others for as long as we live. Consequently, a life of spiritual discipline is absolutely necessary and import. If we do that, the result will be incalculable blessedness and joy forever, for ourselves and those whom we have influenced.