

Training in godliness

An explanation of the Biblical requirement to work hard and train yourself in righteousness

Introduction

It goes without saying that the prime instigator in our sanctification is the Holy Spirit working within us. He is the one who sanctifies and applies the work of Christ to the church. This is widely understood.

Though all members of the Trinity are behind our sanctification¹ we can discriminate different roles. The Father predestines and plans it. The Son achieves all the work and virtue required for it. The Spirit applies what the Father planned and what the Son achieved. Therefore, the practical work of actually implementing sanctification in believers is the work of the Spirit.

Sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience. 1 Pt 1:2

But this work is not mystical, esoteric or hidden; the Spirit works through the faith and actions of the believers themselves; his sanctification is 'for obedience' He gives instructions; they follow. He gives revelation; they apply it. He brings correction; they change. He brings conviction of sin; they repent. Thus the work of the Spirit in sanctification is in coordination with the actions of believers.

For this reason, God's word tells believers that they must train themselves in righteousness. The more a believer learns from the Spirit and actively trains himself to be sensitive to sin and God's word, the more he becomes sanctified.

Now none of this is unusual thinking or radical doctrine; it is normal Christian teaching and has been for thousands of years. But today I was accused of sin for desiring to train myself to be sensitive to God's word. The accuser averred that this was fleshly, human activity and thus false. I did not defend myself because this person did not really want to hear any truth and was actually covering up his own sin. However, it occurred to me that some perfectionists may need to see the evidence for the necessity of training yourself in righteousness. This paper seeks to show how important it is for the believer to work in sanctification.

Growing in holiness is by faith and by obedience; both are necessary. Faith without works is dead mysticism. Works without faith are legalistic deadness. Only by faith and works is true righteousness achieved. This is working in conjunction with the direction of the Holy Spirit.

The divine command to be active in personal training in righteousness

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. Phil 2:12-13

This is the best single explanation of how sanctification is achieved. It begins by the work of God inside the human spirit. Through the Holy Spirit within the believer he gives the will and the divine strength to do certain things. The believer must then obey that divine

¹ 1 Thess 4:3; Lev 20:8; 1 Cor 1:2; Jude 1:1.

prompting in the new man and obey. Nothing will happen unless the believer works out his own salvation.

Working out your salvation is personal training in righteousness. God gives inner power, we strive and work hard.

To this *end* I also labour, striving according to His working which works in me mightily. Col 1:29

Personal training shown in apostolic commands

The fact that we are active in training and correcting ourselves in righteousness and knowledge is revealed in the very many apostolic commands to do this or that. The NT is filled with injunctions made by the apostles to actively work out our sanctification. Here are just a few examples.

Do all things without complaining and disputing. Phil 2:14

Do good to all. Gal 6:10

We have confidence in the Lord concerning you, both that you do and will do the things we command you. 2 Thess 3:4

We command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread. 2 Thess 3:12

Do not grow weary *in* doing good. 2 Thess 3:13

These things command and teach. 1 Tim 4:11

Command, that they may be blameless. 1 Tim 5:7

I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting. Philemon 1:8

Since the apostles command us to do practical things, then it is inescapable that sanctification is partly the work of our activity, our training and our improvement.

Growing in grace involves labour

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labour is not in vain in the Lord. 1 Cor 15:58

Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father. 1 Thess 1:3

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. Gal 6:7-8

Godliness is profitable for all things ... For to this end we ... labour. 1 Tim 4:8-10

God *is* not unjust to forget your work and labour of love which you have shown toward His name. Heb 6:10

Repeatedly Paul refers to the labour and work of the saints. We labour in love; we labour in godliness; we labour in the Lord; we work in faith.

All our life we are sowing something. We are either active in training ourselves unto righteousness or allowing ourselves to sin. The work of faith is sowing unto godliness. Work is involved.

Growing in grace involves diligence

Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it *spring* the issues of life. Prov 4:23

Not lagging in diligence. Rm 12:11

Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience. Heb 4:11

We desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end. Heb 6:11

Giving all diligence. 2 Pt 1:5

Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure. 2 Pt 1:10

‘Diligence’ means: ‘earnestness, diligence, earnestness in accomplishing, striving after’ or sometimes ‘haste’. It is another way of saying striving after something, or earnestly working for something; it can even mean training oneself for something.

From cover to cover the Bible tells us to be diligent about being righteous and godly. Sin or goodness starts in the heart, and we are commanded to be diligent in guarding our hearts so that goodness comes out not sin.

Thus the apostles command us to not lag in being diligent in keeping our heart and making our election certain. This involves training ourselves in godliness. We train our hearts to know and do what is right, what is true. Without diligent training, there is no godliness.

Growing in grace involves striving

I myself always strive to have a conscience without offence toward God and men. Acts 24:16

Strive together with me in prayers. Rm 15:30

Stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel. Phil 1:27

To this *end* I also labour, striving according to His working which works in me mightily. Col 1:29

Striving against sin. Heb 12:4

Striving is not a dirty word, though many modern church leaders preach avidly against the idea of any sort of striving. This is how far churches have failed to understand sanctification and it explains why there is so much prevalence of sin in the church.

Striving is today considered as an act of the flesh and means that a person is not being spiritual. This is nonsense. I doubt many people in the world strived as much as the apostle Paul. This modern notion is mysticism pure and simple. It comes in the wake of superficial doctrines that emerged out of the Holiness and Higher Life Movements 100 years ago. These declared that sanctification was by faith alone. This is a severe mistake.

Justification is by faith alone and many make a mistake in maintaining that sanctification is also by faith alone. It is not. I explain in this paper why sanctification, though it involves faith, is also our work; and it means hard work.

Thus the apostles were not afraid to use the word ‘striving’ often. We strive against sin; we strive for the Gospel; we strive in prayer and strive to have a clear conscience. Striving to have a clear conscience involves training the conscience in truth and striving to not sin. Striving to be godly and training oneself in godliness are the same thing.

Aspects of training in righteousness

Training as a result of divine discipline

A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is perfectly trained will be like his teacher.

Lk 6:40

The whole point of growing in grace is to be more like the Lord Jesus Christ. The stature of man is the Lord himself² and the holiness of his life is the goal of our sanctification. To become like Christ requires 'perfect training'.

Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Heb 12:11

Furthermore, the mistakes we make result in divine chastening. This discipline is meant to train us to produce righteousness. Righteousness is a fruit of training.

Self-discipline

But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.³ 1 Cor 9:27

For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. Rm 8:13

Here we have the twin aspects of sanctification. On the one hand we put to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit; but on the other hand we discipline our bodies into subjection. The two work together. The Spirit gives us revelation and inner strength while we use them to make the body do the right thing.

We can never be holy if we do not discipline our bodies and bring them into subjection. Those who deny this or fail to do it are disqualified – that is they were never genuine believers and fail at the Day of Judgment.

The training of personal cleansing

But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honour and some for dishonour. Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honour, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work. 2 Tim 2:20-21

This is very clear. Those who are useful for God in the church, who are prepared for God's work are those who have trained themselves and have cleansed themselves from dishonourable things. The Scripture is very clear, 'if anyone cleanses himself ... he will be ... sanctified and useful for the Master'. No one can deny that cleansing ourselves is part of sanctification.

The training of abstinence

Beloved, I beg *you* as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul. 1 Pt 2:11

A big part of growing in sanctification is abstaining from things that we have learned are bad. Now this is not as obvious as it sounds. Many Christians go through life thinking that certain things are OK when they are not. This is because their consciences have been seared and do not work properly; they have no conviction that these things are evil. But that is only half of the problem.

² Eph 4:13, 'till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ'.

³ The Greek word is used of the test to ascertain the quality of metals or the genuineness of coins.

The other part is that once you are aware that a certain thing is to be avoided, then you must abstain from it. To fail in this is to sin.

This whole process of learning what to abstain from is training the mind and heart.

The need to flee sin

Flee sexual immorality. 1 Cor 6:18

Flee from idolatry. 1 Cor 10:14

O man of God, flee these things. 1 Tim 6:11-12

Flee also youthful lusts. 2 Tim 2:22

Part of divine training in the Christian is learning what to flee from. Some things are to be abstained but other things require flight. At the slightest temptation of a certain thing, run away. That is something you must learn to do by training. Things we should run away from immediately include youthful lusts, idolatry and fornication. You don't try to reason about these things, you just flee.

A good Biblical example of this is Joseph.

And it came to pass after these things that his master's wife cast longing eyes on Joseph, and she said, 'Lie with me'. But he refused and said to his master's wife, 'Look, my master does not know what *is* with me in the house, and he has committed all that he has to my hand. *There is* no one greater in this house than I, nor has he kept back anything from me but you, because you *are* his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?' So it was, as she spoke to Joseph day by day, that he did not heed her, to lie with her *or* to be with her. But it happened about this time, when Joseph went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the house *was* inside, that she caught him by his garment, saying, 'Lie with me'. But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside. Gen 39:7-12

In this highly charged temptation Joseph did not argue or protest but simply ran away, even leaving his clothes behind. There are times when you cannot reason, protest, argue or prevaricate but must simply flee.

Pursuing righteousness

O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life. 1 Tim 6:11-12

Pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. 2 Tim 2:22

As well as fleeing certain temptations we must avidly pursue certain things, such as: righteousness, godliness, faith, love, etc. Sometimes pursuing these things will involve a metaphorical fight. Pursuing faith will often mean a fight for faith and a real battle in prayer. Fighting for faith is equivalent to personal training in godliness.

Adding virtues

But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, *you will be* neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is short-sighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. 2 Pt 1:5-9

‘Virtue’ means behaviour showing high moral standards. It is the world’s way of saying godliness or righteousness. For the Christian, virtues are the characteristics of Christ that should adorn our personality.

Now here Peter tells us to add such characteristics to our lives; this is a command to do something. We must take action and see that we add knowledge, self-control, godliness, love and so forth. The more we add the fruit of the Spirit to our lives in greater measures, the more we become like Christ. This is personal training.

Those who do not add such virtues to their lives by assiduous training are blind and have forgotten what salvation is.

For example, we must add knowledge to our faith. To do this we have to work very hard; there is no mystical shortcut to knowledge; knowledge comes from personal discipline and training.

The training of putting off the old nature

Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Col 3:5

We are commanded to put off the old man a number of times. Obeying this command requires a number of factors, such as: personal knowledge, understanding what the flesh is and what its works are; understanding the word of God; knowing how to pray, having the mind of the Spirit and so on. All this requires personal training. We gradually learn more and more how to put off the old nature. When we were young we tolerated aspects of the old nature because we did not understand as much about sanctification. When we are older we understand more from experience and are ready to put off more and more aspects of the old man.

The older you are in the faith, the more sensitive you are to sin and failure. This is the result of personal training.

The training of pressing on towards a goal (Christ)

Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing *I do*, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you. Phil 3:13-15

The labour of the righteous *leads* to life. Prov 10:16

The soul of the diligent shall be made rich. Prov 13:14

God, who ‘will render to each one according to his deeds’: eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honour, and immortality. Rm 2:5-7

‘Press’ in Phil 3:14 means: to make to run or flee, put to flight, drive away; to run swiftly in order to catch a person or thing, to run after; to press on: figuratively of one who in a race runs swiftly to reach the goal; to pursue (in a hostile manner); to seek after eagerly, earnestly endeavour to acquire, plus a few other meanings as well. It is a powerful word that sums up the action of earnestly pursuing a goal with the background idiom being the Greek games, which the Philippians would have been very familiar with.

This alone explains that being godly (the prize of being like Christ) requires training, effort and diligence; but to this we can add that such godliness also requires labour (Prov 10:16), diligence (Prov 13:14) and patient continuance in doing good (Rm 2:7). Just as the runner in the Greek games trains to win, all this involves training in godliness for those who seek to be like Christ.

The result of training, attaining a goal

Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained. Phil 3:16

Paul uses the word ‘attained’ regarding our struggle to press on. This means that we have reached a certain goal.

Throughout our lives we slowly gain ground and learn to overcome certain weaknesses one by one. Questionable things and desires that we once had have gone as we got older; we no longer care for them. This is where we have attained certain goals of sanctification.

In other words, our training and discipline has resulted in achieving certain objectives. Without training ourselves these objectives could never have been reached.

The result of training - gaining rewards

Each one will receive his own reward according to his own labour. 1 Cor 3:8

We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things *done* in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. 2 Cor 5:10

Note that God’s word informs us that the heavenly rewards given to saints are for their works. These are not works to get salvation but the faith works that result from salvation.

If rewards are given for our godly work, then godliness involves our work.

Symbols of divine training

Paul frequently alludes to the Olympic games and similar Greek sports events as an allegory of the Christian striving for righteousness. The games were the chief example of the world’s individuals striving for personal excellence in physical pursuits. Paul uses this example as a spur for the believer to work with diligence and consistent effort in pursuing godliness.

Olympic games

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain *it*. And everyone who competes *for the prize* is temperate in all things. Now they *do it* to obtain a perishable crown, but we *for an* imperishable *crown*. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as *one who* beats the air. 1 Cor 9:24-26

This is a clear allusion to the Olympic sport of sprinting and also of boxing. This is emphasised by the mention of competing for a prize. Thus the Christian life is symbolised by the training of Olympic athletes that compete for a laurel crown, however, training in godliness results in an eternal crown.

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares *us*, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us. Heb 12:1

Here the writer is imagining being in a Roman or Greek arena (both had been built in Palestine) where the rising levels of audience seats seems like a cloud of witnesses all around. Like athletes believers must lay aside all encumbrances and then run in the race that is the Christian life.

Conclusion

Godliness is a very active pursuit. We do not sit on our backsides doing nothing and thinking lovely thoughts to become more holy; we pursue righteousness.

The teaching of the apostles, and the great saints of the OT, is that growing in grace is the result not only of the work of the Spirit in us but also our fleeing, pursuing, striving, fighting, and running. It is the result of our diligence, our labour, our faith-work, our pressing on, our self-cleansing, our abstinence and our putting off the old man.

The only people who grow in grace and holiness are those who train themselves to be more like God. The idea that there is no personal work or training involved in sanctification is the heresy of perfectionists.

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