

Title: "Are We Trying or Training to be Disciples of Jesus?"

Theme: To be a follower or disciple of Jesus Christ requires the same kind of commitment as an athlete preparing for competition or a musician mastering an instrument.

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Read: Ephesians 4:17-24

When Jesus says we are to love God with all of our strength we have moved into the realm of the bodily or physical realm. The word Jesus uses here for **strength, *ischuos*, can also be translated *capacity, ability or power***. We love God by harnessing our bodily energy with passion to serve God and our neighbor.

The apostle Paul captures this emphasis through a theme that dominates his understanding of the way that the Christian life is to be lived. My one word summary of Paul's focus would be **discipline**. Paul piles up images of athletes in training, soldiers under command, and hard-working farmers. He loves words like training, self-control, sober, working, labor, and focused-energy to describe the life in Christ.

If Paul were to open a school it would be a Christian fitness center. So let's go into Paul's gymnasium in order to see what ethos you would have to adopt to sign up for membership. Paul regularly uses athletic images to capture the attitude of approach to following Jesus. For example in I Corinthians 9 Paul makes a direct allusion to training for the local version of the Olympic Games. In the Corinthian context, the backdrop was most likely the Isthmian Games, where athletes were required to demonstrate they had been training for 10 months if they wanted to compete. "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict **training**. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever." (I Cor. 9:24- 25) I would submit that the Christian life needs to be approached in the same way that an athlete trains to compete. Practice, discipline, repetition, routine. Michael Jordan in his prime routinely pulled out games

in the waning moments. Why? Because he simply tried at the end of a game? No. Even though he is a most gifted athlete, he spent hours out of public sight, practicing his jump shot and free throws. He worked harder than everyone else in spite of his natural talent.

Note Paul's "how much more" argument here. In human athletic competition a person gets accolades in the moment, but they are fading and fleeting. But you are after a crown that will last forever, therefore *how much more* should we be training to be made over into resemblance of the One we follow.

Paul's Personal Mission Statement

Paul puts forth his own life as exhibit A as one who has attempted to bring everything in his being to bear on his God-assigned role. In writing his own mission statement (which is reflective of this mission statement Jesus gave the church in Matthew 28:18-20), Paul states his call in Colossians 1:28, and then follows it up in v. 29 with the attitude in which he carries it out. "We proclaim Him [Jesus], admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. To this end I **labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.**" Note how Paul strings together his words of passion. He **labors**, meaning it requires hard work and exertion to complete his call. He **struggles** against the lethargy and laziness that could have its hold on him. Then he speaks of the **energy** (*energeian*) of God **energizing** (*energoumenen*) him to complete his call.

John Stott wonderfully sums up Paul's intent, **[11] "You can become a Christian in a moment, but not a mature Christian. Christ can enter, cleanse, and forgive you in a matter of seconds, but it will take much longer for your character to be transformed and molded to his will. It takes only a few minutes for a bride and bridegroom to be married, but in the rough-and-tumble of their home it may take many years for two strong wills to be dovetailed into one. So when we receive Christ, a moment of commitment will lead to a life-time of adjustment."**

A Training Mentality

We are to adopt the same attitude to becoming like Christ as an athlete preparing for competition, a musician mastering an instrument, or a soldier preparing for battle. Becoming like Christ is our vocation or calling in life. Place all of your strength at the disposal of the God who gives you strength to serve Him.

1. The Process of Growth

In Ephesians 4 Paul compares the process of transformation to a life-time make-over. We are to **"put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires...and to put on a new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness"** (Ephesians 4:22, 24). In other words, take off the old tattered, smelly garments which represented your pre-Christian life and put on a whole new set of clothing that is befitting a follower of Christ. We probably have all seen the "make-over shows", when a spouse complains that their partner dresses in a slovenly way around the house, and they want to see this person made-over into the beautiful or handsome person they can be. So the person in question prances onto the stage looking like a slob, but at the end of the program, they emerge transformed. The studio audience "oohs and aahs" at the unveiling of this "new" person.

An Amish boy and his father found themselves one day in a modern shopping mall. They were amazed at everything, but especially the two shiny, silver walls that would move apart and slide back together again. The boy asked, "What is this, father?" The father, never having seen an elevator, said he had no idea what this was. While the boy and his father were watching with amazement, an older woman in a wheel chair rolled up to the moving walls, and pressed the button. When the walls opened she wheeled herself between them into a small room. The walls closed behind her. The boy and his father watched the numbers above the walls light up sequentially and then reverse as they came back down. Finally the walls opened up again and a gorgeous young blond stepped out. The father, never taking his eyes off the young woman, said quietly to his son...**"Go get your mother."**

Now that's a makeover. Put off...Put on. Take off the former way of life, and put on the life that God intends us to live. In a moment, we will reflect on what is entailed in the makeover process, but it must be preceded by the attitude in which we approach this lifelong commitment to growth.

2. The Attitude of Growth

So what is the attitudinal manner in which we should approach this makeover? How do we apply Paul's approach to discipline?

I am indebted to John Ortberg for a significant distinction. This comes from his book, *The Life You Have Always Wanted*.¹ Ortberg says that most of us have been *trying* to live the Christian life, instead of *training* to live the Christian life. There is an enormous difference between *trying* and *training*.

What is the difference? A "trying" mentality is simply dabbling at something; you take "shot" at it, but it is a short term effort. You come at from the mindset, "Well, let's see what this is about", as if you are collecting experiences, but it is not pursued in depth. Trying is a life of flitting from one thing to another but landing nowhere.

There are many areas of life where a trying mentality simply will not cut it. No one would wake up on a Saturday morning, open the newspaper, notice that there is a marathon being held today, and then say, "Hey, I am not doing anything today, I think I will give it a try." It is obvious that months of careful planned preparation are necessary to propel yourself across a 26 mile course, regardless of the pace you set. This is why we made the announcement in January about signing up to run in the Chicago Marathon on the World Vision team in October. You don't simply *try* to run a marathon, or play the piano, or become a doctor.

At some time in our life we have all had to face the fact that a training mentality is necessary to get us where we want to go; for most of us, for example, training has been required for our jobs or professions. The

¹ John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 47.

truth is that mastery of any skill requires dedicated hours of repetitious action.

This is the subject of Malcolm Gladwell's book *Outliers: The Story of Success*. He raises the issue of whether those who achieve significantly do it simply because they are more talented than others or because of other contributing factors. What he discovered is that talent is only one of the elements that led to success. The formula is more like talent + preparation (perspiration) = achievement.

Gladwell focuses on what is called the ten thousand hour rule. Psychologists studied the students at Berlin's Elite School of Music. They ended up dividing the students into three categories:

1. The stars: those with the potential to become concert violinists
2. The merely good
3. Those who would most likely end up teaching music in the public schools.

What made the difference? It wasn't talent. They simply asked all the students one question: Since you first picked up the violin, how many hours have you practiced?

All the students started roughly at the age 5. What they discovered was that the sheer number of hours of practice separated the students into these 3 categories. By age 20 the future music teachers had practiced 4000 hours, the merely good had practiced 8,000 hours, but the ones who had the promise of being concert violinists had practiced 10,000 hours. They documented this 10,000 hour rule in a number of settings. Their conclusion: "It seems that it takes the brain that long to assimilate all that it needs to achieve true mastery."

Pablo Casals, the world renowned cellist in the twentieth century, continued to practice 5 hours a day, even though he was recognized as the world's greatest at his instrument. I loved the answer he gave when someone asked him why. He said, "I think I'm getting better."

If it takes this kind of effort to excel in the matters and skills of this world, how much more should we put into training in order to fulfill the

highest calling of becoming Christlike. John Ortberg writes, "Spiritual transformation is not a matter of trying harder, but training wisely...The need for preparation or training, does not stop when it comes to learning the art of forgiveness, or joy or courage. In other words, it applies to healthy and vibrant spiritual life just as it does to physical and intellectual activity. Learning to think, feel, and act like Jesus is at least as demanding as learning to run a marathon or play the piano."

So let me ask you, honestly, how would you characterize your approach to the Christian life? Are you dabbling? You see, many of us simply look at the Christian faith as a benefits plan. We have reduced the Christian life, as John Ortberg has said, to the minimum entrance requirements necessary to get into heaven when we die. We have prayed the sinners prayer. We think that being a Christian is just a transaction that says, I have acknowledged by need of forgiveness of my sin; Jesus is the one who paid my debt; His credit has been transferred to my account; therefore my debt has been paid in full. Isn't this wonderful? This is what Dallas Willard calls "bar-code" Christianity. We have been rung up by the great-scanner-in-the-sky. But if it is all about receiving benefits, where is the commitment to become a follower of Christ? This leads only to a trying mentality, not a training mentality. Yet a follower of Christ knows that we have been bought with a price, and that our life is not our own. Are you trying or training to be Christian?

3. The Practice of Growth

Paul says that a training mentality is to enter daily rhythm of "putting off the old nature which belongs to our former manner of life...and putting on a new nature created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." In practice, what does training look like? Listen to some words or phrases from Ephesians 4 and see if you can note what they have in common or to what they are pointing. "You must no longer **live** as the Gentiles do...(v. 17), "you however did not come to know Christ in that **way**...(v. 20), "you were taught, with regard to your former **way of life**" (v. 22). **What do the words, live, way, way of life, have in common?** To what concept do they point? They state that the nature of life is about **habits**. To have a makeover is to change our habits of thinking, feeling and acting from a former way of life to the new identity in Christ.

So Paul is essentially saying that the practice of Christian living is to continuously make it our daily practice of putting off the old habits and putting on the new. This is our calling.

A. We are habitual creatures

Therefore we start by recognizing that we are creatures of habit. What is a habit? It is simply a way of thinking, feeling and acting that has become so second nature to us that we do not even think about them. Habits are our unconscious practices.

I think back to the time when I first learned to drive a car. It was overwhelming. So many things to think about—put the key in the ignition, fasten the seat belt, move the seat into position, check the mirrors to see if they are the right angle, keep your eye on the speedometer, be aware of the traffic in front and back, etc. I thought, I will never learn all of this. I am sure, if my father were alive today, he would remember quite well when I first sat behind the wheel of a car. He taught me to drive on a stick or manual shift. My father and I both prayed that upon approaching an intersection that the light would remain green. Mastering the standing start, especially on a hill, was more of an adventure than my father bargained for. Getting the right balance between releasing the clutch while giving it gas, seemed almost impossible at the time. I don't know how many times I sent the car through the intersection heaving and lunging as if I was riding a bucking bronco. I thought, "Too many things to remember." But countless hours later I can slip into a car at the black of midnight, find the slot for ignition key while buckling the seat belt; all along carrying on a heated discussion about predestination.

So practically speaking following Jesus is about training ourselves in the proper habits. We are full of God displeasing habits of thinking, feeling and acting, which Paul calls our "former manner of life" (Eph. 4:22). We are to continuously put in place "the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:24).

B. Don't underestimate the grip of the old habits.

The reason we need a commitment to growth like that of an athlete is that changing habits is extremely hard. The very habits that have become a part of us are integral to our automatic response system. Healthy or not they have been absorbed into our bodies. Paul tells the Ephesians, "No longer live as the Gentiles do..." They could have replied, "but this is all that we have ever known." This is the way we were raised. Our thinking has been immersed in this rebellious culture. We are surrounded by an image culture where the values of materialism (you are what you have) are bombarding us through TV, radio and film, all the time. They shape our world and can become part of who we are.

For those who are athletes of any stripe, even if you are just a weekend golfer, you know the difficulty of changing a bad habit. I can remember when I first heard the concept of "muscle memory"; it was a revelation to me. Athletes can practice bad habits. They become a part of our muscle memory. Our muscles learn certain ways of doing things. We then take some lessons as the pro observes our stroke and begin to teach your muscles a new motion. Teaching our muscles a new memory feels very awkward, until you have done it over and over again so that it becomes a part of your new structure. The same is true of any habits of feeling, thinking or acting.

The process of changing habits can be likened to gravitational pull. We have watched the space shuttle launch into space, an occurrence that requires enormous thrust to break the gravitational pull of the earth's atmosphere. Most the energy is spent in the first few minutes of lift-off, in the first few miles of travel. Similarly, breaking a habit requires a tremendous amount of effort. The power of the old habit wants to pull us back toward earth.

Why are habits so difficult to break? It is because they have sunk their roots deep into our lives in ways we do not even see. Have you ever tried to remove a tree stump? When the Spring comes you say to yourself one Saturday afternoon, "I have a few minutes, I think I'll get that ugly stump out of the back yard." Three hours later you have dug a five foot trench uncovering a network of roots that has extended its grip far deeper than you have imagined. This is why the *trying* paradigm approach to the

Christian life will leave you only frustrated. You have to be in it for the long haul if we want to become true apprentices of Jesus.

Why are habits so hard to change?

C. Practice the principle of replacement

By laying out the framework of putting off...putting on, Paul is giving us a very practical principle, the principle of replacement. We can't simply stop a bad habit, we must identify the new habit that must be put in its place. Why do so many diets fail? We simply try to eat less, and the hunger pangs scream with a vengeance. So you might say to yourself, I am going to watch less TV, or be less critical or sarcastic, or stay off those internet sites that are not pleasing to God. But unless you put something else in its place that is pleasing to God, the old habit will actually come back with greater force. Jesus told the story of the man who had a demon cast from him. The demon went searching for a space to occupy. The demon noticed that the man had not filled his life with a new center, so it came back with seven others and the second state was worse than the first.

To reinforce this principle of replacement, Paul gives five illustrations to make his point in Ephesians 4:25-32.

Verse	Put off	Put On
v. 25	Falsehood	Speak truthfully
v. 26-27	Do not sin in your anger	But address the issues quickly
v. 28	Must no longer steal	Do something useful with your hands
v. 29	No unwholesome talk	Build others up according to their needs
v. 31-32	Get rid of bitterness, rage, etc.	Be kind, compassionate, and forgiving

In others words, it is not sufficient to simply identify the thoughts, feelings, or behaviors that need to be changed, but you also must replace them with the biblical alternative. How do we get in touch with the habits that need to be changed? This is where the elements of the training regimen come in that we have come to call spiritual practices or disciplines.

We learn to listen to what God is saying and be attuned to our own lives through these practices.

This is the way Richard Foster describes the role of spiritual disciplines in his classic work, *The Celebration of Discipline*,

“God has given us the Disciplines of the spiritual life as a means of receiving grace. The Disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so that He can transform us...By themselves the Spiritual Disciplines can do nothing; they can only get us to the place where something can be done. They are God’s means of grace...God has ordained the Disciplines of the spiritual life as the means by which we are placed where He can bless us.”

For example, I show up daily to be in solitude and silence before God with my bible, journal and pen in hand in order to sit quietly in conversation and dialogue over God’s word. This discipline simply puts me where God can have his way with me. I practice the rhythm of the prayer of Examen, so that God can show me what I need to see from yesterday’s events, conversations, and happenings so that I learn to be aware of His presence in the moment. I regularly schedule service locally in my community and mission trips internationally to get out of my comfort zone and remind myself that this life is not about me, but God’s heart for all peoples in all places.

What is your training regimen? How have you harnessed your strength and passion to God’s transformation process?

“Following Jesus simply means learning from him to arrange my life around activities that enable me to live in the fruit of the spirit...Spiritual disciplines are to life what practice is to a game.” (John Ortberg)

Let me conclude with the story of transformation that C. S. Lewis tell in the third book in the Narnia Chronicles, The Voyage of The Dawn Treader. Eustace is a little boy in need a makeover. Eustace is a passenger on the *Dawn Treader*. Being a nasty, complaining, and generally obnoxious, he has managed to alienate his fellow travelers. When the ship

docks on an island, the rest of the passengers head out to explore, leaving Eustace alone. He soon comes face to face with a frightful, fire-breathing dragon. Much to Eustace's relief the dragon expires right in front of him. Yet after a dream-filled night Eustace awakes to find that he has become a green, scaly dragon. This is Lewis' way of saying that he has become on the outside what he is on the inside.

Eustace breaks into tears realizing the meaning of what has happened. How can he rid himself of the prison of this green, scaly skin? That night in his dreams he is approached by Aslan—a lion and the Christ figure in the story. Aslan takes Eustace to a bubbling well, shaped like a round bath with marble stairs descending into it. The water is deliciously inviting, but Aslan says that before Eustace can get into the water he must undress first. Eustace knows that this means he is to shed his skin. He strips off the skin as if peeling a banana. He steps out of the skin and goes over to the water's edge, only to see that his reflection still shows the same rough and wrinkled skin. Two more times he attempts to remove this unwelcome outer garment with the same results. No matter his attempts to change, he cannot.

Then Aslan says, "You will have to let me undress you." Even though Eustace is afraid of Aslan's claws, he is desperate now. Eustace lies on his back and allows Aslan to have his way,

"The very first tear was so deep that I thought he had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling that stuff peel off. After he peeled off the skin, I was as smooth and soft as a peeled peach. He caught hold of me and threw me into the water. At first it smarted, but then it became perfectly delicious. I'd turned into a boy again... After a bit the Lion took me out of the water and dressed me.

New clothes and all."