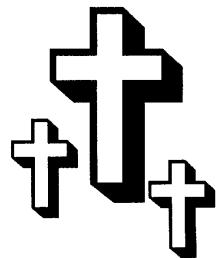


SPIRITUAL ATHLETICS

The Christian's Gym

The Saint's Gym



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"Exercise thyself unto godliness," 1 Timothy 4:7.

Timothy, in Scripture, doesn't seem to be a very strong character. He was sensitive, easily discouraged, and had a tendency to indolence. It is very touching to notice how the old apostle, a prisoner, soon to be a martyr, forgot all about his own anxieties and burdens, and, through both of his letters to his young helper, gives himself to the task of bracing him up. So he says to him in our text, among other triumphant-tongued exhortations, "Exercise thyself unto godliness."

If I were preaching to ministers, I would have to say a lot about this principle for them, and to remind them that it was first spoken not to a private member of the Church, as an injunction of the Christian way of life, but as having a special bearing on the temptations and necessities of those who stand in the pulpit and teach the Word of God.

There is nothing more likely to sap a man's devotion, and to eat out the earnestness and sincerity of a Christian life, than that he should be, as I am constantly occupied with presenting God's Word to other people. We are apt to look upon it as our stock-in-trade, and to forget to apply it to ourselves. So it was with a very special bearing on the particular occupation and temptation of his correspondent that Paul said, "Exercise thyself unto godliness." before you begin to teach the Word to other people.

So this is for the believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, who is in full time Christian service, and who communicates the Word of God to others. We take and make this a universal application to all believers, "who hold forth the Word of life."

First of all, we notice in this verse, THE EVER PRESENT UNIVERSAL AIM OF THE CHRISTIAN WAY OF LIFE EXPRESSED. Paul does not say, "be godly," but "exercise thyself unto," with a view towards, "godliness." In other words, to him godliness is the great aim which every Christian should set

before him as the one supreme purpose of his life. The word "godliness" is almost exclusively confined to these last letters of the apostle. It was evidently a word that had unfolded the depth and fullness and comprehensiveness of its meaning to him in the last stage of his Christian experience. For it is only once employed in the acts of the apostles, and some two or three times in the second epistle of Peter. And all the other instances of its use lie in these three letters, the one to Titus, and two to Timothy, and eight of them in the first one.

The old apostle keeps perpetually recurring to this one idea of "godliness." What does he mean by it? The etymological meaning of the word is "well-directed reverence," but it is to be noticed that the context specifically points to one form of well-directed reverence, as shown in conduct. "Active godliness" is the meaning of the word, **Christianity embodied in deed, emotions, and sentiments, and creeds, put into fact.**

This noble and pregnant word teaches us first of all, that **all true Christianity finds its ultimate sphere and best manifestation in the conduct of our daily life.** Now that sounds like a platitude, I wish it were. If we believed that, and worked it out, we should be very different people from what most of us are, and our chapels would be very different places, and the professing Church would have a new breath of life over it.

Christianity must have its foundation laid deep in the truths revealed by God for our acceptance. Does God tell us anything simply that we may believe it, and there an end? What is the purpose of all the principles and facts which make up the body of the Christian revelation? To enlighten us? Yes. To enlighten us only? A hundred times no. **The destination of a principle, of a truth, is to pass out from the understanding into the whole nature of man.**

And if the foundation of Christianity is laid in truths, principles, facts, the second story of the building is certain emotions, sentiments, feelings, and desires, and affections,

and "experiences" as people call them, which follow from the acceptance of these truths and principles.

And is that all? A thousand times no! What do we get the emotions for? What does God give you a revelation of Himself for, that kindles your love if you believe it? That you may love? Yes. Only that you may love? Certainly not.

So the top story is "conduct," based upon the beliefs and inspired by the emotions. This is the manner of life, or the testimony of the legs.

In former centuries, the period between the Reformation and our fathers' time, the tendency of the Protestant Church was very largely to let the conception of Christianity as a body of truths, overshadow everything else. And nowadays, amongst a great many people, the temptation is to take the second story for the main one, and to think that if a man loves and has the glow of his heart of the conscious reception of God's love, and has longings and yearnings, and Christian hopes and desires, and passes into the sweetness of communion with God, in his solitary moments, and plunges deep into the truths of God's Word, that is godliness.

But the true exhortation to us is: **do not stop with putting in the foundations of the correct creed, nor at the second stage of an EMOTIONAL CHRISTIANITY.** Both are needful. Number one and number two are infinitely precious. But both exist for number three. **True Christianity has its sphere in conduct.** "Exercise thyself unto godliness." "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law."

That does not mean only, for it does include that, to cultivate devout emotions, or realize the facts and the principles of the Gospel. But it means take these along with you into your daily life, and work them out there. **Bring all the facts and the trust of your creed, and all the sweet and select, and secret and sacred emotions which you have felt to bear upon your daily life.**

The soil in which the tree grows, and the roots of the tree, its stems and its blossoms,

are all means to the end, "fruit," PRODUCTION. What is the use of the clearest conceptions, and of the most tender, delicate, holy emotions, **if they do not drive the wheels of action?** God does not give us the Gospel to make us wise, nor even to make us blessed, but He gives it to us to make us good men and women, working His work in our daily tasks. All true Christianity has its sphere in conduct.

But then there is another side to that. **All true conduct must have its roots in Christianity,** and I, for my part, being narrow and antiquated, do believe that in the long run, and in general, you will not get noble living apart from the emotions and sentiments which the truths of Christianity, accepted and fed upon, are sure to produce.

So this day, with its very general depreciation of the importance of accurate conceptions of revealed Truth, and its exaltation of conduct, is on the verge of a very serious error. "Godliness," well-directed reverence, is the parent of all noble living, and the one infallible way to produce a noble life is faith in Jesus Christ, and love, the filling of God the Holy Spirit, which flows from the faith. If all that is so, if godliness is, not singing psalms, and not praying, not saying, "how sweet it is to feel the love of God," still less saying, "I accept the principles of Christianity as they are laid down in the Bible," but carrying out beliefs and emotions in deeds, then the true aim which we should have continually before us as Christians is plain enough.

We may not reach it completely, but we can approximate indefinitely towards it. **Aim is more important than achievement.** Direction is more vital in determining the character of a life that progress actually made.

Note the form of the exhortation. "Exercise thyself TOWARDS godliness." This involves the same thought as is expressed in Paul's other utterance of irrepressible aspiration and effort. "Not as if I had already attained, either were already perfect, but I follow after." Or as he had just said, "I press towards the mark," in continual approximation to the ideal. **Complete penetration of all our actions by the principles and emotions of the Gospel is what is set before**

us here. That is the only aim that corresponds to what and where I am to what I need. I fall back upon the grandly simple old words, very dear to some, maybe by boyish associations, “**Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and so to enjoy Him forever.**”

“Unto godliness.” This is the aim of every true life, and it is the only aim which corresponds to our circumstances and our relations, our powers and possibilities.

Secondly, notice the DISCIPLINE WHICH SUCH AN AIM DEMANDS. “Exercise thyself.” The word “exercise” used here by God the Holy Spirit is drawn from the athletes training ground, and is, in fact, akin to the word which is transported into the English under the form “gymnasium.” The apostle’s notion is that, just as the athlete, racer, or boxer goes through a course of training, so there is training as severe necessary for the “godliness” which Paul regards as the one true aim of life.

As Christians we must train our spirits at least as carefully as the athlete does his muscles. There are plenty of people, calling themselves Christians who never give one-hundredth part as much systematic and diligent pains to fulfill the ideal of their Christian way of life, as men will take to learn to ride a bicycle or to pull the stroke, or to lift weights or aerobics. The self-denial and persistence and concentration which are freely spent upon excellence in athletic pursuits might well put to shame the way in which Christians to about the task of “doing their Christianity.”

I suppose there was never a time in America’s history, whatever it may have been in Greece, when modern instances might give more point to an old saw, than today does for this verse, when athletic sports of all kinds are taking up so much of the time and the energy of our young people. I don’t want to throw cold water on that, but I do say it is a miserable thing to think that so many professing Christians **will give a great deal more pains** to learn to play tennis, volleyball, basketball, baseball, golf, football, **than ever they did to learn to be good Christian people.** “Bodily exercise profiteth for a little, but godliness in all things.” “Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that

needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth.”

“Exercise thyself unto godliness.” **Make a business of living your Christianity.** Be in earnest about it. A tragically large number of professing Christians never were in earnest about mending themselves. And that is why the are so far behind.

“Exercise thyself.” You say, “How?” Well, first of all, CONCENTRATION. “This thing I do.” That does not mean narrowing, because this “one thing” can be done by means of all the legitimate things that we have to do in the world. Whatever may be the form of our daily occupation, it is the GYMNASIUM where God has put us to exercise our muscles in, and so to gain, “the wrestling sinews that throw the world.”

“Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might.” “Whatever you do, do it as unto the Lord, with all your might.” The concentration for which I plead does not shut out from any place, but the devil’s wrestling ground. All that is legitimate, all that is innocent, may be made a means for manifesting and for increasing our godliness. Only you have to take God with you into your life, and to try more and more consciously to make Him the motive-power of all that you do. Then the old saying, which is profoundly true as it was originally meant, and has of late years been so misused as to become profoundly false, will be true again. “**LABORARE EST ORARE.**” Yes it is, if worship underlies the work, but not else.

EXERCISE YOURSELVES BY ABSTINENCE. How many things did the athletes of Corinth do without in his training? How many things do prizefighters and sprinters do without when in training today? How rigidly, for a while at any rate, they abstain, whether they recompense themselves afterwards or not has nothing to do with this present purpose. And is it not a shame that some sensual man shall, for the sake of winning a medal or a cup, be able gladly to abandon the delights of sense, eating, drinking, and the life, and content himself with a hermit’s spartan’s fare, and that Christian people so seldom, and so reluctantly, and so partially turn away from the poisoned cups and the indigestible dainties which the world provides for them?

I think that any Christian who complains of the things which he is shut out from doing, if he is to cultivate the godliness which should be his life, need only go to any place where jockeys congregate to get a lesson that he may well lay to heart. "Exercise thyself, for it is unto godliness."

"Let us lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily besets us and so let us run the race." "Be not drunk with wine wherein is excess, but be constantly filled with the Spirit." "Walk in the Spirit and you will not fulfill the lusts of the flesh." "If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine, whereunto you have attained. But refuse profane and old wives fables, and exercise thyself unto godliness."

The strenuous exercise of all our powers is called for. But if it is true that the godliness of this verse is the last outcome of the emotions which spring from the reception of certain truths, then if we work backwards, as it were, we shall get the best way of producing the godliness.

That is to say, the main effort for all men who are in earnest in regard to their own growth in Christ-likeness is to keep themselves in touch with the truths of the Gospel, and in the exercise of the sentiments and emotions which flow from these. Or to put it into other words, the "gymnasium" is to be, mainly, the man's clinging, with all his might of mind to Christ, and **the truths that are wrapped up in Him, and the cultivation of the habit of continual faith and love turned to that Lord.**

If I see to number one, the creed, and to number two, the emotions, they will see to number three, the conduct, which is fellowship with the Lord. Keep the truths of the Gospel well in your minds, and keep yourselves well in the attitude of conduct with Jesus Christ, through the filling of the Holy Spirit, and power for life will come into you.

"And ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Spirit is come upon you. And ye shall be My witnesses, unto Me both in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the Earth."

But if the fountain is choked, the bed of the stream will be dry. They tell us that away up in Abyssinia there from across the bed of one of the branches of the Nile, are great fields of weed. And as long as they continue unbroken, the lower river is shrunken. But when the stream at the back of them bursts its way through them, then comes the inundations down in Egypt, and bring fertility.

There are hundreds of professing Christians whose fields lie barren and baked in the sunshine, because they have stopped with weeds, faraway up amongst the hills, the stream that would water them. Clear out the weeds, and the water will do the rest. Confess your sin, and God "is faithful and just to forgive you of your sins and cleanse you from all unrighteousness." Then "exercise thyself unto godliness," be keeping the crown and the prize often and clear in view.

Paul the aged, in this very letter says, "I have finished my course, henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of glory." He had said in the middle of the strife, "Not as though I had already attained, I press toward the mark for the prize." The prize which gleamed before him through all the dust of the arena now shone still more brightly when his hand had all but clasped it. If we desire to run with perseverance the race that is set before us, **we must keep our eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, and see in Him, not only the Rewarder, but the Reward,** of the "exercise unto godliness." The gold, silver, and precious stone of the Spirit-filled life of every ordinary believer in Christ.

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