

40 Days Post #1:
The Jesus' Gym Work Out
(1 Timothy 4:6-8)
November 13, 2005

These last several weeks we have tackled two great ideas in our 40 days of the Bible emphasis.

The first big idea was, **why is the Bible so important?** The answer is, that the Bible isn't just another book, or even the most influential book in human history—it is the **inerrant, God-breathed book** that reveals the will and ways and love of God.

The second big idea was, **what's the Bible all about?** In so many ways, I hope you've been able see more clearly than ever that the Bible tells one single story: a story of **creation, fall and redemption** that moves from Abraham and Israel to Christ and the new Israel, the church. Above all else, I hope that you've seen how the whole story of the Bible comes into sharp focus in the person of **Jesus Christ**.

But there is a third great idea that we have to get, and it's in these two weeks of "post 40 days" messages that I want to focus like a laser beam on the last big idea.

And if you don't get this last big idea, you're in danger.

You're in danger of thinking that you're spiritually mature when you're not.

You're in danger of being spiritually fat, not spiritually fit.

You're in danger of Dead Sea Christian, not a Galilee Christian.

You see, there's a reason that the Dead Sea is dead. The Jordan River empties into it, but it has no exit. The only way water gets out is by evaporation. That's why the salt and mineral content is so high. Relatively few forms of life can survive in the Dead Sea, and its water, ten times saltier than ocean water, is undrinkable.

I remember taking a little swim in the Dead Sea. The salts make it almost impossible to even get under the surface, much less drown. I found that I had to really push just to get my legs beneath the surface. It's a kind of helpless feeling. At one point, I thought to myself, if someone were to give me a good push, I'd just sail over to the country of Jordan and I wouldn't be able to stop myself!

But Galilee is different. It's full of life. At night we could actually hear fish jumping around, splashing in the moonlight. No wonder all those fishermen lived there! The Jordan passes *through* the Sea of Galilee, from north to south. In other words, it receives then it gives. That's why it's so full of life and vitality.

The Christian who only receives slowly becomes like the Dead Sea. There's no life and no attraction. There's only inward looking stagnation.

Now a Christian who receives a lot can *think* that they're mature. They can have a Bible with a thousand underlines and a trunk full of notes, *but that's not spiritual maturity*. That can just be spiritual fat in the place of fitness. Spiritual maturity comes when spiritual truth gets expressed and applied in real life, on-going situations.

Once the apostle Paul wrote to his friend and associate Timothy about this in 1 Timothy 4:6-8:

6If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed. 7Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. 8For 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.

Let me give you some context to these words. The issue Paul is writing about is truth. Some were coming up with strange teachings and doctrines. He's warning Timothy not to get sucked into these false teachings, and to warn the church at Ephesus of the same. The alternative, he says is to "train yourself to be godly." Then he compares that to the training routine of an athlete.

Paul would likely have had an opportunity to observe in person the training routine of a Greek athlete. He lived in Corinth at a time when the Isthmian Games were held there. (They were a kind of runner-up to the Greek Olympics—kind of the Good Will Games of the time.)

There are several places where Paul uses the image of an athlete to describe the Jesus-following life. If you look at again at that passage, you'll see a logical progression:

1. Draw upon the word of God that you have been trained in (v. 6)
2. Have nothing to do with crazy false teachings (7a)
3. And now train yourself to be godly (7b)
4. Physical training has some value, but training in godliness is something that lasts forever (8).

Now we've been hammering away at the idea #1 for weeks: "Take in the word! Read it, study it, understand it." But now I want to build on that and urge you to go beyond that to real *training in godliness*.

Let me give you a definition of "training in godliness":

Training in godliness is the intentional, consistent application of Biblical truth that transforms the way we think, what we love, and how we use our abilities and resources.

First, it's **intentional**. This doesn't happen by accident. This is one of the ways it's like physical training. If you don't work out, you won't tone up.

Second, it's **consistent**. So many of the problems that believers face, I've discovered, arises from a lack of consistency. They run hot and then they run cold. There needs to be a consistency for real transformation to occur.

Third, it's the **application of Biblical truth**. Not psychological truth, or Oprah Winfrey truth, or even Max Lucado truth. (Hey, I think Max is a great guy, but he'd be the first to agree with me.) The very **best place** to mine Biblical truth is—guess where? —In the Bible.

The **second best place** is with the help of a mature believer. In Bible times, with written Bibles being so rare, most Biblical truth was passed on in the context of a close mentoring relationship.

And the **third best place** is through really good books. And I mean really good ones, and there are a ton of really mediocre books out there.

The next part of that definition of training in godliness is this: it's Biblical truth that **transforms** us. Training in godliness changes who you are. And it happens not just once, but again and again.

Jesus was once asked, "What's the greatest commandment in the law?" His answer is found in three of four of the gospels. Here's Matthew account:

22:37 Jesus replied: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

The objective of Jesus for us then is that we become people who live this way in increasing measure. We **love** God with our heart, soul and mind, and we **love** other people as much as we already naturally love ourselves. That sounds to me like a lifelong process.

The way I described it in my definition of training in godliness is a transformation in "the way we think, what we love, and how we use our abilities and resources."

So let's talk turkey. Let's get where the rubber meets the road. Let's get down and dirty. Let's get real. (I wonder how many other clichés I can come up with.)

The thing that actualizes Biblical truth in our lives is something called *spiritual disciplines*. Sometimes we call them *spiritual growth habits*. Neither term is in the Bible. "Training in godliness" is the closest Biblical term. But just because an idea isn't found in the Bible doesn't mean that the idea isn't there.

In your study class today, you [will receive *or* did receive] a list of spiritual disciplines. If you weren't in a class today, there's a stack of these on the tables as you leave today.

Dallas Willard tells a story that explains for me at least exactly what spiritual disciplines are all about. He says, say you want to be a baseball player. You don't just show up at Dodger Stadium and take a place in on third base. There's a road to get there. If you *really* want to play baseball, you practice. You play wherever you can. You watch games and you read everything you can about the games. And you practice some more.

If you really want to play, you hang around two kinds of people: great players, and people like you who want to be great players, so that their passion can rub off on you.

Now let's apply this to being a Jesus-follower—just the way that Paul does here and elsewhere in the New Testament. If you want to be a fully formed Jesus-follower, you don't just show up fully formed. There's a road, there's a process. You read the word and you get involved in ministry. You observe other Jesus followers and pick up some tips from them. You hang around other growing disciples so that their love of God can rub off on you, and so your love of God can rub off on them. And you practice.

If I just read about baseball, and never swung a bat, that may qualify me to be a sportswriter, but I'll never play for the Dodgers (or a real team, like the Angels).

It strikes me that what goes on in most churches in most places is designed to make people expert observers of the game, not real players.

But Jesus wants transformation. Just take a gander at the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7, sometimes. Here He calls for us to be salt and light—that means we change our world. He calls us to be different on the inside, not just changed on the outside. It's a radical change that takes a lifetime.

So what are these spiritual growth habits? Five of them seem to be at the core:

- Bible Study (Psalm 119:9, 11; 2 Timothy 3:16-17)
- Prayer (1 Thess. 5:17; Luke 18:1ff)
- Worship (Psalm 100:2; John 4:24)
- Evangelism (Matthew 28:18-20)
- Service (John 13:14-15)

Now this year, we spent a chunk of the summer talking about prayer. And we began the year talking about evangelism (remember: "If you're not fishing, you're not following"?) And you hear me say all the time that every believer, in order to be in the center of the will of God, needs to find and grasp both their *ministry* to other believers and their *mission* to non-believers. That's service.

That leaves Bible study and worship. I would to talk with you at length about worship, and I believe in early 2006 I will do a series on worship.

But I have this conviction that the Bible has to be at the center of our spiritual growth habits. A long time ago, I heard someone say that when push comes to shove, Bible study is more important than prayer, because, after all, it's more important that I hear from God than it is that God hears from me. I think those words could be twisted into an excuse for not praying. But it has a kernel of truth.

Let me make some suggestions that will help you build a bridge from the study of the Bible to the application of the Bible. If you apply these principles, I want to make some promises to you:

- Your life will never be the same
- Your life will never ever be boring
- You will have a great sense of soul satisfaction
- You will know that you are leading a life of significance

OK, tall order, right? Here we go:

1. Unite the study of the word of God with prayer
2. Unite with others in the study of God's word
3. Unite your study of God's word with specific applications, as an individual and as a group

There we are—three simple ideas. Let's unpack them a little.

Unite the study of God's word with prayer

When I was in seminary, there were time when I had a paper to do on a passage of Scripture, so I'd hit the books and the journals, looking up just about everything that had been written on the passage. I have to admit that I didn't pray much about the passage. Now when I read, I find myself pausing and praying when I see the pattern of God's dealings. I was reading in Hosea a few months ago, about his unfaithful wife and how God compared that to the unfaithful behavior of His people. I was drawn into prayer by what I was reading. "Lord, how am I to you? Faithful? How do you see me? My church? The church in America? Are we a faithful bride to You?"

It's even better when this integration of word and prayer is intention. You can pray God's word back to Him—try it, it's powerful. Or you can simply ask these questions as you pray:

- What does this passage say?
- What does it mean?
- How does it apply to my life?
- How then should I pray?

First principle: unite the reading and study of God's word with prayer.

Second:

Unite with others in the study of God's word

Let me give you a general principle, that's taken from observing the pattern of God's word: *most of the things that God does in this world is done through groups of believers who unite around His word.*

Many American Christians have a Lone Ranger mentality. It's a pattern of thought that discourages group life, the Body Life pattern that is laid down for us in the Bible. The church is called the "Body of Christ" in the Bible, and we are all like members—fingers and toes and shoulders—in the body of Christ.

And every generation where spiritual renewal occurs rediscovers the power of coming together in smaller groups to study and pray and to plan ministry and mission together. You can find these small groups in the Bible. The most famous small group in history was Jesus and the 12 apostles.

The power of group study arises from the fact that people who are more mature spiritually and in their knowledge of Scripture can

accelerate the learning curve of people who aren't as far along. I read of a celebrity, an actor, who went off to a cabin to study the Bible alone for a month. At the end of that time, he came out so full of nutcase ideas that it took him years to get straightened out. Group study corrects us and holds us accountable as well as accelerates us.

That's why I'll always be banging the drum to get people in study groups. You need to be in a study group. That's a non-negotiable. If it was good enough for Matthew and Peter, it's good enough for you!

Now, the third way to apply:

Unite your study of God's word with specific applications, as an individual and as a group

Will was in a Bible study in suburban London. As they studied together, they began to apply the word of God to one of the great issues of the day: the British slave trade. They became firm abolitionists.

Then Will was elected to Parliament. He began to speak against the slave trade. He served for many years, into old age, and just months before his death, Parliament abolished slavery in the British Empire.

That's the power of application. They could have been content with abstract studies on Melchizedek and the chronology of the kings of Judah. But instead they asked the question, "If the Bible says this, then what do we do about it?"

The modern missionary movement was born in small groups of believers studying the Scriptures and then applying what they'd read. The AA movement, Alcoholics Anonymous, was

born the same way. So was Promise Keepers.
And so was Campus Crusade.

But more important than all those organizations are the zillions of groups that just read, study and apply. Where marriages get saved and lives changed and the poor are ministered to and the lonely find a friend.

The real test of a study group is not being able to pass a Bible literacy test (though that's not such a bad idea). The real test is that the group becomes a loving hand of Jesus Christ one to another and to a world in hurt. I think the group is exactly where we are most likely to find our *ministry* to other believers and our *mission* to non-believers. And I want to challenge all our groups with a question: what are you doing that is taking the message of God's word into the world of those who don't know Jesus?

So I want you to take up a challenge today. If you're not in a study group, **get in one**. Right now, I want all study group leaders to stand. Those are the people you can talk to about a group. Get connected.

A further challenge: I want everybody in a study group to stand. Here's my challenge: tackle the question in your group, "What is our group's **ministry** to the church **and** our **mission** to non-believers?" If you really go after that, and get out of yourselves, I guarantee the blessing of God. Then it will be a matter of holding on tight because things will really happen!

Bored Christians. I don't understand them. It's like being bored at 4th of July fireworks. God's got all kinds of things He wants to do in your life. And the word of God is the gateway into those things. Let's get at it! Amen?

END/PRAYER