**Cultivating Growth in the Christian Life**

Text: 1 Timothy 4:6b-7

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**Scriptures:** Proverbs 3:1-12; 1 Timothy 4:6-8

Songs Chosen: Behold our God; [SttL] 51b, 471, 505, 180

**Series:** Occasional

**Theme:** The Apostle Paul encourages the younger man Timothy to train for godliness.

**Proposition:** Cultivate growth in godliness for yourself and others

**Introduction**

Would you agree with this statement: **“The healthy growing Christian is a spiritual athlete who cultivates godliness”?** If you do agree, you’d be in good company with Bible Commentator Matthew Henry who said, “*Those who would be godly must train themselves to be godly; it requires constant exercise*.”

If you do agree you’d also be in good company with the Apostle Paul. In our text he writes to exhort Timothy to “train *yourself for godliness*”. Here Paul uses a Greek word for train from which the word “gymnasium” was derived. Today we know a gym as a place where athletes train and complete in many sports, including gymnastics. In the early Greek world, the gymnasium was originally a centre for both the physical and intellectual education of aristocratic, adolescent boys. They were trained in wrestling, swimming, running, use of the bow and sling. They were also trained in reading, writing, mathematics, politics, philosophy, and music.

Later on in the history of the Greeks, the gymnasium was open to all citizens. It became a training facility for public games. It was a place where athletes would build muscle mass, endurance, resilience, flexibility and skill. Both their diet and their exercise routines were carefully regulated at the gymnasium so that they could attain to physical fitness goals.

Do you have goals in your life? For study/career/business/hobbies/sports? These are good things, but more importantly, are you aiming for growth in your own personal Christlikeness that is godliness, or sanctification (growth in holiness)?

We all need self-discipline to reach any high goal in life. If you’re going to build strong resilient muscle, you’ll need bucket loads of self-discipline: ‘no pain, no gain’. If you’re going to master a musical instrument, get A+ in an exam, be the leader in your field, then you’ll need to ‘put in the hard yards’ of determined effort.

In contrast, it is true that a sloppy, disorganised, lazy lifestyle generally leads to the disappointment of goals never attained. This approach often results in a life of regret.

On the topic of determined effort, the Word of God points us to a small insect: “*Go to the ant, O sluggard, observe her ways and be wise,which, having no chief, officer or ruler, prepares her food in the summer, and gathers her provision in the harvest*” (Prov 6:6). The ant is a highly self-disciplined creature and works towards a worthwhile goal.

Similarly, Paul writes to encourage Timothy to labour and strive hard for a high objective. The young man Timothy was a ‘sole charge’ pastor, on his own in Ephesus. The Apostle Paul didn’t want him to be an ineffective servant of Christ, so Paul gives him this instruction: v7 “*Train yourself for godliness*”, in other words: exercise yourself for godliness, discipline yourself for godliness.

As we consider from our text the topic of ‘cultivating growth in the Christian life’, we’ll look firstly at the motivation for this spiritual growth, then the nutrition necessary to sustain this growth, and finally the training methods to pursue this growth.

1. **Motivation for Growth**

There are a number of things which motivate me to bodily training.

1. On average as we age beyond 50 years old, there is a 15% decrease in muscle mass every 10 years if we do not regularly exercise. It’s a case of ‘use it or lose it’.
2. I want to retaining mobility and strength as I get older as much as it depends on me.
3. I’d like to be able to enjoy physical activity with my children (and hopefully grandchildren) in the future.
4. I know that the more physically fit I am, the more likely I am to recover more quickly from illness and injury
5. I also wanting to keep myself as physically attractive as I can for my wife, despite my ongoing hair loss and increasingly wrinkled skin.
6. But most of all, to be able to serve the Lord as effectively as I can for as long as I can. A pastor whose body no longer supports active ministry is not able to continue to serve. As much as it depends on me, I want to go the ‘maximum distance’ in being useful in God’s Kingdom on this earth as I maintain a sustainable pace over the years. This is my goal, but it is not my highest priority; spiritual health is more important to me, as it was for the Apostle Paul.

When comparing athletic physical training with spiritual training he writes: “*for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way*” (1 Tim 4:8b). Paul assumed that Timothy understood what godliness was because Timothy had been trained up in the Scriptures by his mother Eunice and grandmother Lois. Timothy came to trust in Christ for himself after Paul had visited his hometown of Lystra. He had travelled with Paul for most of the 2nd &3rd missionary journeys. He had a close relationship with Paul, who was his mentor. Paul describes himself as Timothy’s “father” (Phil 2:22). Timothy is described by him as his “son” (1:2; 18:1). Timothy had ‘*been trained in the words of faith and of good doctrine*’ (1 Tim 4:6).

Timothy would have known that godliness is living a life which is set apart for the Lord. A life of consecrated to God. Godliness is looking in character like the LORD, that is like Jesus, who is the ‘*image of the invisible God*’ (Col 1:15). Godliness is observed in a person’s speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity (as Paul notes to Timothy in v12).

Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers: “*Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ*” (1 Cor 11:1). Timothy had seen Christ modelled by Paul, but not perfectly. Paul would not have been completely godly in all his speech, conduct, love, faith and purity. A reality which he openly admitted to Timothy: “*It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all*” (1 Tim 1:15).

Paul had a “thorn in the flesh” – messenger of Satan to torment him. God had said to him about his lack of godliness: "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*" (2 Cor 12:9). So Paul said, “*Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me*”. (2 Cor 12:9) Paul himself knew that he had not already obtained the goal. He, like Timothy, like you and me, needed to keep on training for godliness.

An athlete is likely to sustain some injuries as she trains for an event. Likewise, in our spiritual growth there are almost always set-backs along the way: disappointments, failures, losses, griefs and unforeseen obstacles. These slow us down and may ‘stop us in our tracks’. For a time we may lose substantial spiritual fitness. Sometimes the injuries and scars we sustain last a lifetime, as Paul’s thorn in the flesh likely did. Here is the encouragement of God’s grace to us all who live as injured spiritual athletes, perhaps limping along the course of life: “*We know that for those who love God all things work together for good,for those who are called according to his purpose*” (Romans 8:28).

Sometimes the Lord in His mysterious grace, builds strength and resilience though our suffering and pain. “*For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.*” (Heb 12:11) Sometimes we need others to carry us while we heal from injury. Sometimes our spiritual progress is very slow whilst we heal.

What is your main goal in life? Is it godliness? Both your own growth in becoming more holy and in helping others in their training?

I expect to have somewhat better mobility and strength than I would have if I didn’t exercise physically, but it won’t have any lasting value, because I can’t take this body with me to the other side of death. In the grave no amount of physical fitness will be of any help to anyone. You see that, unlike physical training, spiritual growth in godliness is valuable both for this life and for the life to come (1 Tim 4:8). As Paul explains to the Corinthians: **“***Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable*” (1 Cor 9.24-25).

Here are some ways in which training for growth in godliness of value:

**First and foremost for the glory of the Lord**, as Peter concludes in his second letter by saying (2 Pet 3:18): “*Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen*”. Paul was calling Timothy to be a spiritual athlete in training so that he would honour and glorify Christ his Lord and saviour:

* by being a good servant (1 Tim 4:6)
* by setting an example to other believers (1 Tim 4:12)
* by active service in devoting himself to the ministry of the Word (1 Tim 4:13)
* by making visible progress that everyone could see (1 Tim 4:15)
* by careful examination of himself and his teaching (1 Tim 4:16)
* by persistence in cultivating ongoing growth in godliness (1 Tim 4:16b)

Brothers and sisters, look forward and desire to receive commendation from Christ when you go to be with the Lord. Words like ‘*well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master*.' (Matt 25:23).

**We are not saved by being godly, but so that we can train to be godly**.

Are you motivated to grow in godliness by your love for Christ who first loved you and for the joy that was set before him endured the cross and despising the shame completed His mission to save you? He now provides you with his Word so that you can grow, which brings us to our 2nd point.

1. **Nutrition for Growth**

One of the reasons I exercise physically is so that I can eat more☺. I do like my food. God could have just provided a single source of nutrient with which to sustain our bodies, like he did for the Israelites in the desert when they eat manna. God could have provided us all with some manna-like substance with all the elements we need for life, perhaps even with no taste or texture. However, our God so much more generous than that! The good food that we can enjoy is wonderfully varied, tasty and appealing to the senses.

Just as eating good, wholesome, nutritious food is essential for growth in physical health, so similarly, good, wholesome, nutritious food is essential for growth in spiritual health. “*Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD*” (Deut 8:3b). The Word of God is ‘fuel’ for sanctification – that is for growth in godliness, as Jesus prayed to God His Heavenly on behalf of his disciples: *“Sanctify themin the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17).* The Word of God is profitable for training in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16). The Holy Spirit enables the Word to be taken in, to be ‘digested’ and applied by the person in training (John 16:13-14). If you desire to train yourself for godliness, then you must feed on God’s Word. There are three ways to do this (all are important):

1. **Corporate worship –** Meeting together regularly as a gathered congregation to hear the Word on the Lord’s day.
2. **Private worship**

* Meditating on the word privately “*his delight is in the lawof the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night*” (Ps 1:2)
* Committing God’s Word to memory “*I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you*” (Ps 119:11)
* Praying- pouring out your personal adoration, thanksgiving, confession and supplication to your Heavenly Father.

1. **Small group worship** – interacting with one another around the study of God’s Word by asking questions and by thinking about answers.

Some Christians tell themselves that they are just too busy to attend worship services regularly, too busy to have a regular ‘quiet time’ of personal devotion with Bible reading, meditation and prayer, too busy to regularly attend a group Bible study. What’s the solution? Get even busier? No. Feel really guilty? No.

There’s another aspect to the word ‘gym’. Not only did it mean training for Greek athletes, it meant training without any clothes on! Now it is true that they stripped-off partly in order to worship the body, but they also did so to be able to move more quickly, without the restrictions of clothing.

To train or discipline yourself in the terms Paul was instructing Timothy means to throw off any hindrances which might slow down your progress. The author of the book of Hebrews puts it this way: “*let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us*” (Heb 12:1). An Olympic athlete will deny herself McDonalds. He will not spend hours watching Netflix or checking Facebook very frequently. She will not sleep-in regularly in the morning. He will stay away from influences which will weaken him.

Paul warns Timothy to “*have nothing to do with godless, irreverent, silly myths*”. These false truths were like spiritual junk food, not only having no nutritional value, but actually hindering healthy growth. Spiritual equivalents today would include much of what is available on media: T.V., internet and movies.

You and I need to throw off the hindrances which prevent us from devoting ourselves to regular corporate, private and small group worship so that we can receive plenty of spiritual nutrition to fuel our spiritual growth, both individually and collectively. Do you agree?

To cultivate growth both in your own Christian life and also to assist in the growth of others, you need gospel motivation and plenty of spiritual food. You also need to be training for growth…which bring us to our 3rd point.

1. **Training for Growth**

To grow physically you need more than strong motivation and a good diet, you need to train. The same is true for spiritual growth. Here are some of the things which are necessary to train for physical growth in addition to a strong motivation and a good nutritious diet:

* Discipline – consistency, regularity, persistence.
* Planning – making a plan and then executing that schedule.
* Balanced training – including strength, flexibility, resilience.
* Measurement – carefully tracking progress, perhaps using a fitness watch.

The same patterns also apply in the spiritual realm of training for godliness:

1. **Discipline** – consistency, regularity, persistence. Paul writes to Timothy about the ‘toil and striving’ (1 Tim 4:10) which are necessary for training in godliness. Like the physical gym, pain is generally involved in gain. For most of us, most of the time, growth in godliness does not come easily. Sanctification is a work of God in us in which we cooperate. Paul describes it this way to the Philippian believers: **“***Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but 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 work for his good pleasure*” (Phil 2:12-13).
2. **Plan to grow** ‘*train yourself for godliness*’ (1 Tim 4:7). Consider removing some of the hindrances in your life which reduce your intake of the nutrition necessary for spiritual growth: God’s Word, for example: **plan** to attend both worship services on the Lord’s Day, **plan** to regularly attend a small group Bible study, **plan** to have a time of private devotion each day when you read the Word, meditate on what you have read and pray.
3. **Balance your training** by including not only public congregational worship, private devotions and small group worship, study, and prayer, but also actively apply what you have taken in. For Timothy this meant devotion ‘*to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and to teaching’* (1 Tim 4:13).

For you and I this means exercising the Word we have received as we live our lives for example, studying the character of our Lord Jesus from the Word: “*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14). “*And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favour with God and man*” (Luke 2:52). **“***Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered*” (Heb 5:8).

Study the Bible so that you can grow in godliness of *‘speech, conduct, love, faith and purity’* (1 Tim 4:12). Focus your attention on the incarnate man Jesus – He is the “frontrunner” for all those who would follow Him. Think about how much Jesus suffered under opposition from the Scribes and Pharisees, from Caiaphas, from Herod, from Pontus Pilate, from Judas Iscariot. “*For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart*” (Heb 12:3). Be strengthened by your understanding of all that Christ endured for you. Avoid the runner’s exhausted collapse when he or she ‘hits the wall’ by meditating on how Jesus ran in the face of great opposition.

Apply the Word to the different parts of your life as you ‘*work out your salvation in fear and trembling*’. In your relationships: friends, marriage, family, and congregation. In these relationships seek to cultivate your own spiritual growth and cultivate spiritual growth in others. In your service for Christ: giving, evangelism (proclaiming Christ), pastoral ministry in the church, leadership.

1. **Measure your growth** in two ways:
2. through self-examination – ‘*keep a close watch on yourself*’ (1 Tim 4:16)
3. through the observation of others ‘*Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress*’ (1 Tim 4:15)

Would you agree that “The healthy growing Christian is a spiritual athlete who cultivates godliness”? Are you personally motivated to grow in godliness? Do you desire to increase your intake of spiritual food to fuel your growth? Are you committed to consistently and persistently train for godliness? Will you assist others by helping in the cultivation of spiritual growth in their lives? To do so demonstrates your love for Christ, your love for God’s people and your desire to honour God in your life.