

# CHAPTER SEVEN - ONE WHO DISCIPLINES HIS BODY

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Reading: 1 Cor. 9:23-27; 2 Cor. 11:27; 1 Cor. 4:11-13; Rom. 8:11.

Paul writing to the Corinthians said: *“Now this I do for the gospel’s sake, that I may be partaker of it with you. 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. **But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.**”* (1 Cor. 9:23-27).

In verse 23 Paul introduces himself as a servant of God, a preacher of the gospel. *“Now this I do for the gospel’s sake,”* he says; and having told us what an uncompromising attitude he has adopted toward himself in order to realize his objective – *“I discipline my body and bring it into subjection”* – he proceeds to explain how he gives effect to this determination of his to maintain the mastery of his body.

We wish right away to make it clear that the writer of the Corinthian epistle is not an ascetic. He does not hold with those who teach that the body is an encumbrance which we must seek to get rid of, much less that it is the source of evil. On the contrary, in this same letter he declares that the body of the believer is a temple of the Holy Spirit, and that a day is coming when the redemption of the body will be an actuality and we shall have glorified bodies. No trace of asceticism should mar the Christian conception of “buffeting the body” (KJV)<sup>1</sup>. We repudiate the thought that the body is a hindrance to us and is the source of sin; but we do definitely acknowledge that we can sin with the body, and that we can still sin however drastically we deal with it.

## THE CHALLENGE: MAKE THE BODY SUBMISSIVE TO OUR INTERESTS

In this ninth chapter of 1 Corinthians Paul confronts Christian workers with the challenge of making the body subservient to their interests as servants of Christ. It is as a Christian worker, as a preacher of the gospel, that Paul approaches the problem, and it is in the interests of the gospel that he seeks to solve it. And here is his solution – **“I buffet my body and bring it under”** (KJV). The term “buffet” is no soft term; there is no suggestion of half measures in Paul’s treatment of himself.

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<sup>1</sup> Other translations say: “I strictly discipline my body and make it my slave” (NARB). “I strike a blow (like a boxer) to my body and make it my slave” (NIB)

Just how Paul buffets his body and gains the mastery over it he explains clearly. As this subject is of vital importance to every Christian worker, let us note carefully what he has to say about it.

### **LIKE SOMEONE WHO RUNS TO WIN IN A RACE**

In his practical application of the subject to the Lord's servants, Paul uses the illustration of a race-course. "*Do you not know*", he says in verse twenty-four, "*that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it.*"

- Not all who enter the race are prizewinners, says Paul, and he exhorts his readers so **to run that they may win the prize**. How that can be done he explains in verse twenty-five, and he draws his metaphor from the Olympic games. "*Everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things.*"
- Paul stresses the need of self-discipline on the part of every competitor. Those who compete for the prize must exercise rigorous control over themselves.
  - o During the period of training before the games they cannot eat when they please and what they please; much that might be normally allowed is no longer permitted. And when they actually enter the course stringent rules must be adhered to; otherwise they will be disqualified.

You say: I must have this, and I must have that. All right! If you are not a competitor in the games, you may; but if you are, you must have your body under absolute control.

#### **What does "temperate in all things" mean?**

- It means that the body must not be allowed to make excessive demands; its liberty has to be curtailed. It is not on the racecourse in order to satisfy its demands for food, or drink, or clothing, or sleep;
- it is there to perform one function – to run, and so to run that the prize is secured.

Paul continues to reason from this same illustration: "*Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we **for an imperishable crown.***" The winner in the Olympic sports was crowned with a fading laurel wreath, yet he subjected himself to rigorous discipline over an extended period in order to gain it.

#### **What self-control should not we exercise to win an imperishable crown?**

- "*Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air*", says Paul, still pursuing his theme.
  - o He is not subjecting himself to all this discipline for nothing;
  - o he has a clear objective in view;
  - o he is making straight for the goal.
- This verse has to be read in conjunction with the next.
  - o He is not running hither and thither, and he is not fighting at random;
  - o all his movements are regulated because he has his body strictly under his sway,
  - o and he has been able to gain the mastery over it by disciplining it violently.

Brothers and sisters, if you have not yet brought your body under control, you had better call a halt in the work and gain dominion over it before you try to exercise authority in any wider realm.

- You may take great pleasure in the work, but it will have little value if you are dominated by your physical cravings.
- Serving the Lord is no mere matter of preaching sermons from a platform. Paul knew that.

## HOW TO SUBMIT YOUR BODY TO DISCIPLINE

What is implied by bringing our bodies into servitude? To understand that, we must first understand what the demands of the body are. We shall only mention a few of them – food and clothing; rest and recreation; and in times of sickness, special care. All these are legitimate demands.

- But the Lord's work makes its demands too, and if I am to respond to these I shall have to impose restrictions on the body.
  - o When the work makes special demands on the physical frame, it will be able to endure the strain if it has been constantly disciplined,
  - o But .... if its cravings have normally been allowed to govern, it will be out of condition when strenuous service is required of it.

If it has not habitually learned to serve its master, when he calls on its members to put forth their combined efforts on the racecourse, the feet will refuse to function and the other members will be slow to obey orders. If the race is to be won, the athlete dare not relax his restraint on the body when he is off the racecourse.

- If in the ordinary, everyday life of a Christian worker his body has never been taught to know its master, how can it be expected to respond to the extraordinary demands he will at times have to make upon it for the work's sake?
  - o It is only as you persistently assert your authority that it will eventually cede you your place. If in everyday life it has acquired the habit of obedience, it can be counted on to serve you faithfully under circumstances of exceptional strain.

## ABOUT SLEEP AND REST

May I ask, Are you the master of your body, or are you its slave? Does it submit to your orders, or do you give way to its desires?

- Your body regularly demands sleep, and that demand is legitimate. God has divided time into day and night to provide man with the opportunity to rest, and if man disregards the divine provision, he will not do so with impunity.
- On the other hand, if he allows his body to govern, and lets it sleep whenever it feels so inclined, it will become too soft and sluggish to work.
- Normally it is reasonable to allow the body eight hours' rest each day, but ... when the Lord's interests require it,
  - o we may have to reduce the hours of rest, or even forgo sleep altogether for a night or two.

That night in the garden of Gethsemane the Lord took three of His disciples apart and said to them: *“My soul is exceedingly sorrowful even to death. Stay here and watch.”* But when He returned from prayer He found them sleeping and said to Peter, *“Simon, are you sleeping? Could you not watch one hour?”* No, they could not watch with our Lord for even an hour; the craving for sleep had overcome them.

What is wrong in wanting to sleep at night?

- Nothing.
- But if the Lord requires us to watch with Him and we obey our bodily cravings instead of obeying Him, we shall have failed as His servants.
- This does not mean that we can go without sleep indefinitely, for we are human beings, not spirits; but it does mean that:
  - o **if we are to meet the Lord’s need we must constantly keep the body under control so that it becomes inured to hardship.**

What does it mean to run the race?

- It means doing something exceptional. Normally we walk along gradually step by step, but on the racecourse we have to quicken the pace, so the body is called upon to put forth extra effort.
- As a rule we may allow ourselves eight hours’ sleep, but ... whenever the Lord’s service demands it
  - o we must be prepared to curtail our rest-time;
  - o it is then that we must ‘buffet’ the body.

When our Lord found His disciples sleeping after He had specially asked them to watch, He laid bare the trouble: *“The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”*

- What is the good of having a willing spirit if the flesh is impotent to do what the spirit wills?
- If the flesh is weak, even a willing spirit cannot keep you awake.

If you are to watch with the Lord when He requires it, you will need a willing body as well as a willing spirit.

- The body is not an encumbrance,
- but it is a servant that needs training in order to serve well;
- and the training has to take place under ordinary circumstances so that it will always be ready to meet the demand of exceptional circumstances.

Nicodemus came to the Lord by night, and the Lord could talk to him at leisure, despite the lateness of the hour; and the Gospels record that at times the Lord could spend whole nights in prayer. He was prepared to allow His ministry to encroach upon His sleep, and we must be prepared to do the same.

- We are not advocating that Christian workers make a habit of spending nights in prayer.
- To turn night into day and constantly spend the night hours in prayer is damaging to body and mind, for it is abnormal;

- But is it normal for the Lord's servants never to sacrifice their sleep for His service?
  - o If in this matter of sleep we indulge the body habitually, it will balk when we try to impose any restriction on it to meet some special demand of the work.

## ABOUT EATING AND DRINKING

The same principle applies to the matter of eating and drinking.

Under special circumstances our Lord could abstain from food, but He could eat well when there was no call for abstinence. His body had to obey Him.

- Some people are so dependent on food that they cannot work if they have to go hungry.
- We undoubtedly need food and we dare not ignore our physical needs.
- But the body must be trained to go without food when circumstances require.
  - o You remember the occasion when the Lord sat down beside Jacob's well to rest a while and was brought face to face with a woman in great need. It was mealtime, but the Lord ignored His own physical need and patiently explained to her how her spiritual need could be met.
    - If we arrive hungry at a certain place and cannot do anything there till we have had a meal, our bodies are not serving us as they should.
    - Without being extremists, surely we should have mastered them to this extent at least that, if for the work's sake we make them go short of one meal, they do not overcome us by their insistent cries for food.
  - o In the third chapter of Mark's Gospel we read that the Lord was surrounded by such a multitude of needy folk that he had no leisure to eat. His friends reacted by seeking to drag Him away from the crowd, for they said He was beside Himself;
    - but He could do no other than waive His own physical needs for the time being because of the pressing need of the multitude.
    - If you and I can never forgo a meal when the work demands our immediate attention we shall do little effective work. At such times we must bridle our bodies lest they get the upper hand and the Lord's interests suffer.
  - o The Bible states plainly that Christians should fast when occasion requires.
    - Sometimes a special need calls for prolonged prayer that leaves no leisure for food,
    - and when we meet a situation that will not yield to prayer unaccompanied by fasting ...
      - we must temporarily refuse to grant the body's rational demands.

## ABOUT COMFORT

Another demand of the body is comfort.

- We dare not find fault with a worker for enjoying a measure of ease when circumstances permit;
- **what we should, however, deplore would be inability on his part to respond to the call of the work if the comforts he was accustomed to were not provided.**

- The Lord's servants should be able to enjoy the relaxation of easier conditions when He so orders;
- and those who, despite the fact that they are comfortably situated habitually 'buffet' the body
  - o will be better able to adapt to circumstances of great discomfort
  - o than those whose lot is inferior to theirs but have not made it their business to bring their bodies into subjection.

## ABOUT CLOTHING

As for clothing, it should not command undue attention. The Lord Jesus said of John the Baptist that if anyone wanted to see an elegantly attired person there was no good in looking in his direction; the place to look was the royal palace.

- Some Christians, sadly, have set themselves too high a standard in the matter of clothing and insist on always conforming to that.
- We hold that it is not glorifying to the Lord for us to wear disreputable garments,
  - o but that we should, whenever possible, be clean and tidy and suitably dressed;
  - o nevertheless, we should not forget the example set us by Paul, who could let everything go for the Lord's sake. Referring to his own experiences he writes: "*in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness*" (2 Cor. 11:27).

## IN TIMES OF SICKNESS OR WEAKNESS

In times of sickness or weakness the body makes heavier demands than usual, and under such circumstances many a Christian worker excuses himself from work.

- How could Paul ever have done the work committed to him if he had called a halt whenever he was not feeling fit?
- And what would have happened to Timothy's ministry if he had pampered his body when he suffered from his "frequent infirmities"?

It is necessary for us to take reasonable care of ourselves in sickness and in health,

- but that does not rule out the necessity to 'buffet' the body and keep it under.
- Even in times of sickness and intense pain, if the Lord so commands, we can refuse to heed all its cries and obey Him.
- If we are to be of use to Him it is imperative that we gain full mastery over these bodies of ours.

## ALL OTHER BODILY CRAVINGS

This principle must be applied to sexual desire as to all other bodily cravings. If we are Christ's servants, then His service must have priority over all else. In 1 Cor. 4:11-13 Paul says: "*To the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless. And we labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; being defamed, we entreat. We have been made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now.*"

It is obvious that Paul's manifold sufferings in the flesh were not confined to an isolated period in his life, and that nothing was ever allowed to hinder his service for his Lord.

- In the sixth chapter of this same epistle, from verse twelve to the end, he refers to two matters – the matter of food and the matter of sex – and he makes it very clear that we are servants of the Lord, not servants of the body.
- Then in chapter seven he treats the subject of sex in some detail, and in chapter eight the subject of food
  - o pressing his point home that we are under no obligation to do the will of the flesh
  - o for we belong to Christ and must serve Him.
  - o For His sake we must learn to say “No” to our physical cravings,
  - o and we shall have to enforce our “No” with dealings sufficiently drastic to establish the fact that the reins are in our hands.
- The Lord is the Creator of the body and He has created it with certain impulses that are perfectly legitimate;
  - o but He created the body to be our servant, not our master,
  - o and until that is established we cannot serve Him as we ought.

Even such a one as Paul feared he might be *rejected* from the racecourse and *miss the prize*; so he took the precaution of subduing his body by constant ‘buffetings’. And what can we say of our Lord who denied Himself the uttermost glory and stooped to the depths of shame and suffering?

- For love of Him shall we not command these bodies to serve us that we may serve Him unhampered?
- Shall we not bid them be strong in the strength of His risen life?
- Has He not said, “*If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you*”?

- END OF CHAPTER -

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## FOR THE DISCUSSION FORUM

I am aware that the service we are called to do in Ligaya entails a lot of our time and attention, and that sometimes it feels like this is a full-time ministry as if we had no other commitments and obligations elsewhere. Yet, the truth is, we have to juggle our service in Ligaya in between our full-time professional work, and managing our homes, and also, literally, taking care of our bodies for physical and mental endurance.

I think that it is providential that we are tackling this chapter right as Lent begins. I want you to read this chapter in the context of the spirit of Lent, particularly the spirit of fasting and of dying to ourselves. Hopefully these reflection guides will help you appreciate the lesson of Watchman Nee, and become an even stronger, more effective and more fruitful servant of the Lord.

1. Have I been prioritizing my Ligaya service responsibilities according to God's will, or am I allowing guilt or pressure to dictate my commitments?
2. In what areas of my life is God calling me to greater discipline and diligence in terms of preparing myself (a) mentally, (b) emotionally, and/or (c) physically for all the responsibilities that He has called me to in my service in Ligaya?
  - State your answer in terms (a) what you need to stop doing; and (b) what you need to start doing.
3. Please share and discuss the above items with your Pastoral Leader, or your District Coordinator (whoever is now pastoring you.)

- GOD BLESS US ALL -