

“Freedom Through Discipline”

The Winter Olympics are upon us. We can watch amazing feats of skiing, skating, bobsledding etc. Have you ever thought how awesome it would be to be able to do what they do: to know the freedom and exhilaration of competing as finely tuned athletes! But we know, don't we, that to even qualify for the Olympics, it takes an incredible amount of discipline and self-sacrifice.

Forbes magazine ran an article entitled “How To Train Like an Olympian.” It mentions that it takes 4-8 years to train for the Olympic games. You go to one of the Olympic Training Centers. In addition to a rigorous practice schedule, day after day, you regularly meet with a team – a nutritionist, an exercise physiologist, a sports medicine specialist, a coach. They evaluate your strengths and weaknesses, monitor and tweak your diet and training regiment. You have to “go to bed with the kids” – 8-10 hours of sleep at night, plus a 30-90 minute siesta through the day.

You want to have a chance at winning a gold medal? Well, you just don't have shot at it without discipline, self-sacrifice, and a thoroughgoing commitment to the task at hand.

Jesus, in different ways, said if we want to live life with Him as one of His disciples, and win the crown of life, it would take discipline, self-sacrifice, and a thoroughgoing commitment to that goal.

Check out these words of Jesus: “Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done’” (Matthew 16:24-27). Jesus says deny yourself. Take up your cross – put selfish, lesser goals to death. Discipline yourself. The words “disciple” and “discipline” come from the same root word.

Once an Olympic hopeful signs on to try out for the Olympic games, think of all that person foregoes and sacrifices for that moment of glory when the games start. Once we “sign on” with Christ and commit to being a disciple, discipline and self-sacrifice are also necessary if we are to grow and mature as follower of Jesus.

Yes, salvation comes as a gift. We aren't saved by working for it, earning it. We *begin* our life in Christ simply by receiving forgiveness and new life as a gift. But *continuing* as follower of Jesus takes effort and commitment on our part.

Think how crucial discipline and self-sacrifice are in many areas of life. ***It's not just Olympic athletes who require self-discipline and sacrifice.*** Watch a pro football game and see a wide receiver make a thrilling catch in the end zone for a touchdown, or a running back weave his way through would-be tacklers. Or hear the crack of a bat and see a slugger hit a home run or watch an outfielder make an acrobatic, diving catch of a line drive in the gap. How can they do that? First, of course, is a God-given ability. But in addition to that, there is self-discipline and training. There's no room in pro sports for a player who skips practice, or lollygags through

team workouts. In fact, pro athletes now train throughout the course of the year. They spend time in the off season in the fitness room, often under the watchful eye of a personal trainer or fitness coach.

People would often come up to Gary Player, the pro golfer, and say, “I’d give anything if I could hit a golf ball like you.” One day, he lost patience when a spectator made that remark. He said, “No you wouldn’t. You’d do anything to hit a golf ball like me, if it were easy. Do you know what you have to do to hit a golf ball like me? You’ve got to get up at 5:00 every morning, go out to the golf course, and hit a thousand golf balls! Your hands start bleeding, and you walk to the clubhouse and wash the blood off your hands, slap a bandage on it, and go out and hit another thousand golf balls! This is what it takes to hit a golf ball like me.”

Sacrifice, hard work, discipline paves the way for joy and freedom in the world of athletics. But this is also true in the area of *music*. We watch a great pianist, her fingers moving with ease and agility over the keyboard. In her hands is the power to produce music that can inspire us or give pleasure and enjoyment. How does that come about? Yes, it requires God-given talent. But do you think she practices 10 minutes a day, and only on days she feels like it?

How many of you took music lessons when you were a kid? Did you like to practice? Did you have to be hounded by your parents to practice? I took music lessons. I was supposed to practice 1 hour a day. Summer days, when I would hear my friends outside playing baseball, and I would be inside practicing, it was hard. My music teacher once pointed out to me that a professional musician I envied practiced 8 hours a day.

I took 10 years of accordion lessons. Back then I was pretty decent. Now, I don’t play that instrument much. And guess what. I’m not as good. I don’t have that freedom to play difficult songs as I used to. I’m *bound and captive* – my fingers are stiff and my ability has lessened. Then one day I bought a guitar. I took about 4 guitar lessons, then quit. But I hacked away at learning guitar. One of the things on my bucket list was to someday own a Martin guitar. And the day came when I bought a Martin guitar. I thought of taking lessons again. But I never did. A friend sent me video guitar lessons. I did that a while, then stopped. I need to pick it up again. Funny thing, thinking about it doesn’t improve my playing!

In so many areas of life, it’s discipline, effort, sacrifice that opens doors to a worth-while achievement, whether it is in getting good grades, losing weight, working with wood or yarn, or establishing a career as a teacher or pilot or plumber or nurse. Max Anders has said, “Only the disciplined ever really get good at anything.”

All of this holds true in the spiritual realm. When we are undisciplined, careless and inconsistent in our spiritual practices, we don’t grow and we’re not useful to God

Jesus spoke of this: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit” (John 15:1-2). Every Jesus follower who is effective and influencing others for Christ is

pruned so he or she can bear more fruit. “Pruning” involves stripping away habits, attitudes, distractions that prevent us from letting the fullness of Christ shine through us.

We’re thinking about freedom through discipline. This applies to the realm of *prayer*. Who experiences the greatest joy and freedom in prayer? People who pray only when they feel like praying, or when a crisis comes? Or the person who makes prayer a daily discipline? Who sticks to it in spite of dry spells when praying seems to be a waste, and there is no sense of the presence of God? Of course, it is those who discipline themselves to hang in there and keep on praying! They are the ones most likely to have moments when God seems especially near. Someone has said, “Prayer has to be a discipline before it can be a joy.”

The same holds true for the use of the Bible. The Bible has the power to guide and inspire us, to free us from hurtful, destructive things. But who is it that discovers this joy and freedom that Scripture provides? The individual who waits for some crisis, then grabs a Bible out of desperation, opens it at random, and hopes to find some helpful word? No. People who experience the liberating power of God’s Word are those who in a systematic, disciplined way read it, study it, and try to live it. I believe it was a man named Gus Nichols who tells of someone coming to him and saying, “I’d give my life to know the Bible like you do.” Nichols replied, “That’s what it took.” (i.e. It took a lifetime of study and searching).

We can find joy and freedom when we gain a growing understanding of the Scriptures and integrate their truths into our life. But it’s a long-term, life-long pursuit. By the way: It’s not too late to start down the road to a daily, systematic reading of the Bible!

Freedom also comes through discipline with respect to *our habits and behaviors*. Our generation is not keen on discipline and self-denial when it comes to personal habits. *Self-indulgence and instant gratification* are more down our alley.

Here again, who’s better off? A person who exercises little control over their *speech and language*. One who gossips, freely criticizes, spouts off before they think, is careless with words? And in so doing causes turmoil, hurt feelings. Or a person who has learned to discipline what he or she says, watches their tongue, and seasons their speech with clean language and kind words?

Who has more freedom and joy when it comes to *sex*? Is it the person always thinking about sex, consumed with lust? Or the person who accepts sexuality as a wonderful gift of God, but tempers this desire with restraint and self-control when needed?

Who’s the happiest and most free? Persons who *buy just about everything they want*, wind up saddled with an enormous credit card bill that holds them captive financially, or people who control their greed, and wait until they can afford to buy the things they want?

True freedom in personal habits only comes with self-control, discipline. The Apostle Paul realized that discipline is necessary if we are to have spiritual integrity: “Don’t you realize that

in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win! All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. So I run with purpose in every step. I am not just shadowboxing. I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified” (1 Corinthians 9:24-27 New Living Testament).

Jesus said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). Notice, Jesus said, “Take up their cross.” This meant death. No, not *physical* death. A different kind of death.

Maturing in Christ is a kind of dying. It involves putting to death in us old patterns...old desires...old sins. Dying to self-will...self-interest...self-centered ways of living. And allowing Christ and His will to become more central and dominant. The Apostle Paul described this well: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). Paul took up his cross: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live.” Another time he said, “I die every day” (1 Corinthians 15:31). One of the secrets to living a life of usefulness to God is to get ourselves out of the way, and let Christ live in us and work through us.

This sermon has been all about discipline, self-denial, sacrifice, so we can experience the joy and freedom that comes from following Christ. I realize that’s not the kind of message a lot of people today want to hear! In Tennessee, two convicts dug under a fence and escaped to freedom. Within hours they were captured and returned to prison, where both had several years added to their sentence for breaking out of jail. Strangely enough, one of the men only had 30 days left on his sentence. When he was asked why he would risk extra years on his sentence when he could have been out in 30 days, he simply replied: “I couldn’t wait.”

Isn’t that like a lot of us! I couldn’t wait! I don’t know if I have the patience to work long term at developing a prayer life, understanding the Bible, developing my character and spiritual depth. Discipline – how drab is that! Self-denial – nah, I want to do my own thing! Delayed gratification – I want and need it now!

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. Historically in the church, Lent is a season when we focus on the sufferings and death of Christ, and our own need for self-denial and discipline if we want to be followers of Jesus worth our salt. *The joy and freedom of the deeper Christian life comes to those who are disciplined.*

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Community United Methodist Church
February 18, 2018

