

DISCIPLINES

of a

GODLY
YOUNG
MAN

R. KENT HUGHES & W. CAREY HUGHES

Disciplines of a Godly Young Man

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DISCIPLINE IS EVERYTHING!

Those who watched Mike Singletary (perennial All-Pro, two-time NFL Defensive Player of the Year, member of the Super Bowl XX Dream Team, and former head coach of the San Francisco 49ers) “play”—and observed his wide-eyed intensity and his churning, crunching *samurai* hits—are usually surprised when they meet him. He is not an imposing hulk. He is 6 feet tall and weighs maybe 220 pounds. Why the greatness? *The answer is: intense, purposeful discipline!* Mike Singletary is as disciplined a student of the game as any who have ever played it.

In his autobiography, *Calling the Shots*, Coach Singletary says that in watching game films he would often run a single play fifty to sixty times, and that it took him three hours to watch half a football game, which is only twenty to thirty plays!¹ Because he watched every player, because he mentally knew the opposition’s tendency—given the down, distance, hash mark, and time remaining, because he read the opposition’s mind through their stances, he was often moving toward the ball’s preplanned destination before the play developed. Mike Singletary’s legendary success is testimony to his remarkably disciplined life.

INGLORIOUS DISCIPLINE

Discipline is the difference in the sports world. Tiger Woods (prior to his moral failure) was, by all estimates, the greatest golfer of the last decade—and those who have watched clips of him juggling a golf ball on the head of a driver and then driving the ball from midair straight

down the fairway for 200 yards are in awed agreement. But this playful stunt was only the tip of a massive iceberg of lifelong discipline which began at the age of three—the discipline of a man so focused that he once refused to leave a practice hole until a dozen of his drives rested on a white towel on the distant green. The legendary Jack Nicklaus, the most successful golfer of all time, once quipped, “The more I practice, the luckier I get.” Michael Phelps’s eight (yes, you read it correctly—eight!) *gold* medals at the 2009 Olympics in Beijing were the result of thousands of hours and miles in the pool of disciplined—boredom. The glory of a Kobe Bryant three-point shot that wins a basketball game at the buzzer is the apex of a life of inglorious discipline!

Matthew Sayed, in his international bestseller *Bounce: Mozart, Federer, Picasso, Beckham, and the Science of Success*, observes that British superstar David Beckham’s trademark free kick—his “bend it like Beckham” trajectory—began when, as a boy, he would take his soccer ball to an East London park and kick the ball from the same spot for hours on end, perfecting the topspin that gave his kick its devastating dip. “My secret is practice. I have always believed that if you want to achieve anything special in life you have to work, work, and then work some more.”² Canadian icon Wayne Gretsky, regarded as the greatest ice hockey player ever, became what he is because early on he disciplined both his mind and his body for the rough-and-tumble game. As a boy he systematically charted the angles of the ricocheting puck so that he came to anticipate what was going to happen on the ice better than any player in the game. The “Great Gretsky” was there when the puck arrived. Listen to how Gretsky describes himself: “I wasn’t naturally gifted in terms of size and speed; everything I did in hockey I worked for.” And then later, “The highest compliment that you can pay me is to say that I worked hard every day. . . . That’s how I came to know where the puck was going before it even got there.”³

You may have read in school that the famous writer Ernest Hemingway was a boozy, undisciplined genius who downed a quart of whiskey a day for the last twenty years of his life but, nevertheless, had the literary “gift.” He was indeed an alcoholic driven by complex passions.⁴ But when it came to his gift for writing, he was the essence

of discipline! His early writing was characterized by obsessive perfectionism as he labored to develop his compact style, spending hours polishing a sentence or searching for just the right word. It is a well-known fact that he rewrote the conclusion to *A Farewell to Arms* seventeen times in an effort to get it right.⁵ Even toward the end, when Hemingway was reaping the ravages of his lifestyle, he daily stood before an improvised desk from 6:30 a.m. until noon every day, carefully marking his production for the day on a chart. His average was only two pages—five hundred words.⁶ It was discipline, Ernest Hemingway's massive literary discipline, his painstaking economy of words, that transformed the way people throughout the English-speaking world expressed themselves.

Michelangelo's, da Vinci's, and Tintoretto's multitudes of sketches, the *quantitative* discipline of their work, prepared the way for the astonishing *quality* of their work. We wonder at the anatomical perfection of a da Vinci painting, but we forget that Leonardo da Vinci on occasion drew a thousand hands.⁷ Michelangelo said it for all: "If people knew how hard I had to work to gain my mastery it would not seem so wonderful at all."⁸ In the last century, Matisse explained his own mastery, remarking that the difficulty with many who wanted to be artists is that they spent their time chasing models rather than painting them.⁹ Again the discipline factor!

Winston Churchill was rightly proclaimed the speaker of the century, and few who have heard his eloquent speeches would disagree. Still fewer would suspect he was anything but a "natural." But the truth is that Churchill had a distracting lisp which made him the butt of many jokes and resulted in his inability to be spontaneous in public speaking. Yet he became famous for his speeches and his seemingly impromptu remarks.

Actually, Churchill wrote everything out and practiced it! He even choreographed the pauses and pretended the fumbblings for the right phrase. The margins of his manuscripts carried notes anticipating the "cheers," "hear, hears," prolonged cheering, and even standing ovations. This done, he practiced endlessly in front of mirrors, fashioning his retorts and facial expressions. F. E. Smith said, "Winston has spent

the best years of his life writing impromptu speeches.”¹⁰ A natural? Perhaps. A naturally disciplined hard-working man!

And so it goes, whatever the area of life.

Thomas Edison came up with the incandescent light after a thousand failures.

Ever tried.

Ever failed.

No matter.

Try again.

Fail again.

Fail better.

SAMUEL BECKETT

Mozart chocked up thirty-five hundred hours of practice before his sixth birthday. He had practiced ten thousand hours by his teens. A prodigy? Not at all! Mozart’s brief thirty-five years of life reveal him to be among the hardest-working composers in history.¹¹ Jascha Heifetz, the greatest violinist of the twentieth century, began playing the violin at the age of three and soon began to practice four hours a day until his death at age seventy-five—when he had long been the greatest in the world—having accumulated some one hundred two thousand hours of practice.

We will never get anywhere in life without discipline, be it in the arts, trades, business, athletics, or academics. Whatever your particular thing is, whether it is swimming or football or soccer or basketball or tennis or surfing or mountain climbing or bull riding or motocross or chess or math or computer science or the guitar or the sitar or writing or poetry or painting—whatever it is—you will never get anywhere without inglorious discipline.

This is doubly so in spiritual matters. In other areas we may be able to claim some natural advantage. An athlete may be born with a strong body, a musician with perfect pitch, or an artist with an eye for perspective. But none of us can claim a natural spiritual advantage. In reality, we are all equally *disadvantaged*. None of us naturally seeks after God.

As the apostle Paul said, “None is righteous, no, not one; no one

understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one” (Rom. 3:10–12). Therefore, as children of grace, our spiritual discipline is everything—everything! We repeat: *discipline is everything in the Christian life.*

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

This *Food for Thought* heading will appear at the end of each chapter of this book, and under it we will list several thought-provoking questions to further your thinking and discussion. But here, at the end of the first chapter, we have decided not to include such questions but, rather, to ask you to do two things that will help you to benefit from the strong teaching that follows. First, take some time at the end of this section to pray that God will use each of these hard-hitting chapters in your life. If you are using this book for a study group, take some time to pray for each other. God delights to hear men pray such prayers—and delights to answer them.

Second, commit yourself to memorizing the saying of 1 Timothy 4:7–9, which is the greatest text in the Bible on spiritual discipline, “Train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance.” This über trustworthy saying underlies every chapter of this book, and if you will take the time to store it in your memory, you will find the Holy Spirit working its truth out in your life.

So, before going on to the next chapter, take a few moments to begin memorizing the forty-two words of this text, and then spend some time by yourself or with your group praying that God will make you a disciplined, godly man.

APPLICATION/RESPONSE

What did God speak to you about most specifically, most powerfully in this chapter? Talk to him about it right now!

DISCIPLINE FOR GODLINESS

As we saw in the preceding chapter, whatever your field (you name it!), you will never get anywhere in it without discipline. And this is doubly so in spiritual matters because our sin makes us all equally disadvantaged. The fact is: *discipline is everything in the Christian life.*

This being so, the statement from Paul to Timothy regarding spiritual discipline in 1 Timothy 4:7—“train yourself for godliness”—takes on not only huge importance but also personal urgency. There are other passages that teach discipline, but this is the greatest text on this subject in the Scriptures. The word “train” comes from the word *gymnos*, which means “naked” and is the word from which we derive our English word *gymnasium*. In traditional Greek athletic contests, the participants competed without clothing so as not to be encumbered. Therefore, the word “train” originally carried the literal meaning “to exercise naked.”¹ By New Testament times it referred to exercise and training in general. But even then it was, and is, a word with the smell of the gym in it—the sweat of a good workout. “Train yourselves, exercise, *work out(!)* for the purpose of godliness” conveys the feel of what Paul is saying.

SPIRITUAL SWEAT

In a word, Paul is calling for *spiritual sweat!* Just as the athletes discarded everything and competed free from all that could possibly burden them, so we must get rid of every weight, every association, every habit, and every tendency that impedes godliness. If we are to

excel, then we must attain a lean spiritual nakedness. The writer of Hebrews explains it like this: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, 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). Men, we will never get anywhere spiritually without a conscious shedding of the things that are holding us back. What things are weighing you down? Your lusts? Your habits? Your attractions? Your fears? Your hatred? Your friends? Your girlfriend? The call of discipline demands that you throw them off. The question is: Are you man enough?

The call to train ourselves for godliness also suggests directing all of our energy toward godliness. Paul pictures this elsewhere: “Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control” (1 Cor. 9:25–27). Intense energetic sweat! We should note that two sentences later in this context of Paul’s command to “train yourself for godliness,” he comments on the command saying, “for to this end we toil and strive.” The “we” refers to Paul and his apostolic sidekicks. The battle-scarred, old apostle, survivor of enough hardships to break a thousand hearts, continued on to his death to train himself for godliness. “Strive” in the Greek is the word from which we get “agonize.” Paul worked out, agonized, sweated for godliness.

When a man seriously trains, he willingly undergoes hours of discipline and even pain so as to win the prize—running ten thousand miles to run the mile at his best. Even more, the successful Christian life is a sweaty, sometimes agonizing affair!

No manliness, no maturity! No discipline, no discipleship! No groans, no growth! No training, no triumph!

WHY THE DISCIPLINES?

Understanding this, we now get down to the reason for this book, which is that in today’s world and church, young Christian men who are disciplined are the exception, not the rule. Why? The answer is that the popular, politically correct culture of the new millennium

suppresses manliness, and especially the manliness and leadership of young men who attempt to follow Christ. The reasons are several (feminism, entertainment, and legalism), and together they are daunting.

Feminism

During the 1970s, certain feminist strategists initiated the so-called “Girlhood Project” with the intent of effectively blurring, and even erasing, the distinction between males and females. According to author and social critic Barbara Defoe Whitehead, feminists called for “a new sexual standard based on traditional boyhood. In their plays and pursuits, little girls were to be made more like boys. Among cultural elites, a traditionally feminine daughter became a mild social embarrassment, while a feisty tomboy daughter became a source of pride.”² The “copy the boys” approach was applied to all of life: to sexuality, to speech, and even to body type with the tomboy ideal of a wiry, athletic body. Along with this, naturally active and competitive boys were penalized for their boyish behavior, while girls were lauded for ruggedness and athletic prowess.³

The effect today is a culture that celebrates a female body that is sculpted, by exercise and diet, to look like that of a man and by convention to talk like a man and act like a man. Amid this cultural inversion, a rugged, assertive, and disciplined young man is deemed a threat. If a guy lifts his head to take charge in a mixed-gender situation, he is labeled as a chauvinist or a sexist pig. So, there is a generation of younger men who have been neutered and neutralized as to their natural ruggedness and willingness to undergo the disciplines that will turn them into real men. And Christian young men are particularly susceptible to being cowed by the culture, because discipline for godliness demands a particular toughness and rugged individuality in a castrating, God-denying culture.

Entertainment

The second culprit in the neutralizing of young men is the addiction to entertainment. A face front lit by the glow of a luminous screen is

a study in passivity. Fleeting images, intermingled with the thousand commercials and banner ads of an average week's viewing, instill passiveness. There is no time for engagement or reflection, much less action. The viewer becomes a passive, munching, sipping *drone* (*Webster's*: a male bee that has no sting and gathers no honey). There are guys, voyeurs, who have substituted viewing for doing and imagine that they have scored a touchdown or taken a hill by virtue of having watched it—passive living legends in their own inert minds.

Sexual voyeurism is a most pathetic delusion because in it a young man's God-given testosterone (which is meant to infuse manliness) becomes a medium of enslavement and impotence. Sexual voyeurism steals a man's virility and initiative. Godly discipline becomes a receding mirage for the voyeur. And this also applies to the millions in the thrall of the gaming world (addicted to games like *WoW*, *Half-Life*, etc.) which keep young men playing games into their thirties in their *Star Wars* pajamas—warriors in their imaginations. Those enslaved by the world of entertainment will never attain manliness, a life disciplined for godliness—a life overseen, instructed, and energized by *the Man* of all men—the Lord Jesus Christ.

Legalism

There is also another reason why some young men, especially those raised in the church, neglect the call to discipline—and that is the fear of legalism. For many men, spiritual discipline suggests putting themselves back under the law with a series of unbending rules which none can live up to—laws that bring frustration and spiritual death.

But nothing could be further from the truth when you understand what legalism and discipline are. The difference is one of *motivation*: legalism is self-centered; discipline is God centered. The legalistic heart says, "I will do this thing to gain points with God." The disciplined heart says, "I will do this thing because I love God and want to please him." There is an infinite difference between the motivation of legalism and that of discipline! Paul knew this implicitly and fought the legalists bare-knuckled all the way across Asia

Minor, never giving an inch. And now he commands us, “Train [*discipline*] yourself to be godly!” If we confuse legalism and discipline we do so to our souls’ peril.

Men, what we are now going to say comes straight from our hearts as father and son. This book is intensely practical and user-friendly. It is, of necessity, tough. It will give you no quarter because the church worldwide needs young men to be real men!

COSMIC CALL

We cannot overemphasize the importance of this call to spiritual discipline. Listen to Paul again from 1 Timothy 4:7–8, “Train [*work out!*] yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.” Whether we have disciplined ourselves will make a huge difference *in this life*. We are all members of one another, and we are each either elevated or pulled down by the inner life of each other. Some of us affect others like a joyous tide, lifting them upward, but some of us are like undertows to the body of Christ. When you become married, the presence of or lack of spiritual discipline will service to bless or damn your children and grandchildren. Spiritual discipline, therefore, holds huge promise for this present life.

As for “*the life to come*,” spiritual discipline builds the enduring architecture of your soul on the foundation of Christ—gold, silver, and precious stones that will survive the fires of judgment and remain a monument to Christ for eternity (1 Cor. 3:10–15). Some may minimize the importance of spiritual discipline now, but no one will then! “Godliness is of value in every way” (1 Tim. 4:8)! The disciplined Christian gives and gets the best of both worlds—the world *now* and the world *to come*.

The mere mention of the word *discipline* may raise the feeling of constraint in some minds—suggesting a hemmed-in, restricted life. Nothing could be further from the truth! The obsessive, almost manic discipline of Mike Singletary liberated him to play like a wild man on the football field. Tiger Woods’s lifelong discipline was the foundation

for his becoming the youngest player ever to win the Masters. Michael Phelps's thousands of nautical miles made him the toast of Beijing. Kobe Bryant's astonishing work ethic has made him the greatest basketball player in the world. David Beckham's breathtaking discipline freed him to "bend it" like no other. Wayne Gretzky's discipline liberated him to be in the right place on the ice at the right time and be "the Great Gretzky."

Hemingway's angst over the right word freed him to leave a mark on the English language second only to Shakespeare. The billion sketches of the Renaissance greats set Michelangelo free to create the skies of the Sistine Chapel. Churchill's painstaking preparation freed him to steel England for her "Finest Hour" amid the onslaught of the Third Reich. The disciplined drudgery of the musical greats released their genius. And, young brothers in Christ, *spiritual discipline frees us from the gravity of this present age and allows us to soar with the saints and angels.*

Do we have the sweat in us? Will we enter the gymnasium of divine discipline? Will we strip away the things that hold us back? Will we discipline ourselves through the power of the Holy Spirit? We invite you to man up, put down the joystick, and get to work. This is your call to sanctifying sweat—to pain and great gain—to be men, not boys. God is looking for a few good men!

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Reflect on the command in 1 Timothy 4:7–9 ("train yourself for godliness"). What is the literal meaning of "train" here?

What usually gets in your way (Rom. 3:9–18)? What does a lack of spiritual discipline do to your life?

Why is training yourself for godliness so liberating?

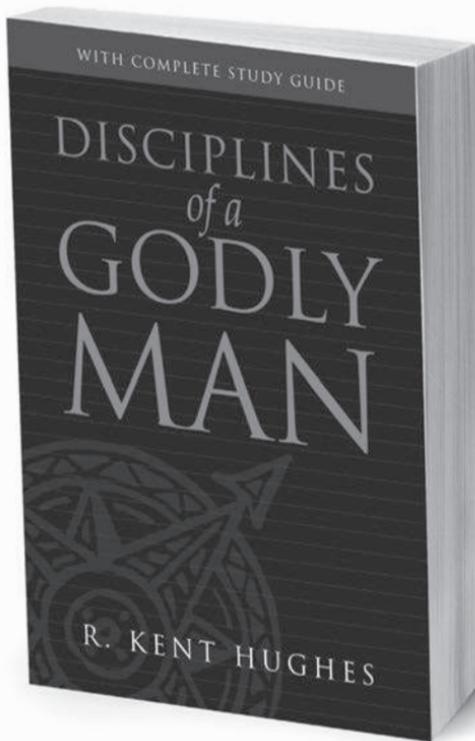
What does Hebrews 12:1 call us to do? What things are holding you back in your walk with God?

How does spiritual *discipline* differ from *legalism*? Which do you most often practice?

You will never get anywhere without spiritual discipline! True or not true? “No manliness, no maturity! No discipline, no discipleship! No sweat, no sainthood!” True or not true? If you agree that this is true—are you ready to take up the challenge?

APPLICATION/RESPONSE

What did God speak to you about most specifically, most powerfully in this chapter? Talk to him about it right now!



THE BEST-SELLING
CLASSIC ABOUT
CONTEMPORARY
CHRISTIAN
MANHOOD

“An inspiring and practical guide for men who seek to reflect God’s glory in their lives. This book is a challenging text for personal devotions as well as for assisting young followers of Christ to grow in their walk with God.”

Howard D. Graves (*U.S. Army, Retired*), *Former Superintendent, United States Military Academy*

Point blank, this is a punchy, no-holds-barred book for young men. Laying out the challenge to be disciplined, godly, and sold-out for Jesus, the authors talk about purity in your thought-life, cultural pressure, and perseverance as a Christian. Let father and son Kent and Carey Hughes help you live a life of integrity and become the man God is calling you to be.

“This book is relevant, theological, culturally astute, and challenging for the serious student. It is a MUST READ.”

Steve Keels, *Student Ministries
Pastor for 32 years in Oregon*

“In a male culture marked by spiritual apathy and passivity, this book serves as a clarion call to single-minded discipline, radical purity, and kingdom purpose. I can scarcely think of a book more necessary for the emerging men of the next generation.”

David Setran, *Associate Professor of
Christian Formation and Ministry at
Wheaton College*

“I am so grateful to God for this great aid to the overriding aim of all our lives: Christlikeness—read it and repent.”

Rico Tice, *Associate Minister
in England*

“Be warned. You may struggle with this book at first—not because it is hard to read, but because the authors show the high benchmark that God demands of your young life. They lay it out on the table, simply and clearly, chapter by chapter, discipline by discipline, and then they invite you to live the life God requires. Make sure you read this book to the end.”

Justin Moffatt, *Senior Minister
in Australia*

“A serious wake-up call for young men who seek to follow Christ. With its straightforward tone and gospel-grounded challenges, this book is a perfect introduction to the spiritual disciplines for young men who love Jesus.”

Jon Nielson, *High School Pastor
in Illinois*

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CHRISTIAN LIVING / YOUTH

