

Discipline Yourself . . . Without Legalism

By Don Whitney

My wife Caffy and I have a longtime friend who asked me about the book I was writing. When I told her the title was *Simplify Your Spiritual Life*, she responded abruptly with, "No rules."

"What do you mean?"

"There should be no rules for the spiritual life. I try to read in four different places in my Bible every day, but some days I read in only two or three. I don't want a rule that says I have to read four."

But the Bible itself gives us *some* rules about our spirituality. One of them, for example, is in 1 Timothy 4:7, "Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness" (NASB). In obedience to this command, every Christian should pursue intimacy with Christ and the imitation of Christ through the practice of the personal and congregational spiritual disciplines found in Scripture. What we should oppose is measuring this pursuit by rules that aren't in the Bible.

So while the Scripture commands us to engage in the spiritual disciplines, we don't want to pursue them legalistically. Legalism is the improper emphasis on works in our relationship to God. It focuses on the manifestations of spirituality that can be measured by number, frequency, duration, amount, and so forth. No one has the authority to force upon themselves or anyone else external measurements of spirituality that have no scriptural basis. Thus, it would be legalistic to tell our friend that she must read four places in the Bible every day, or even that she *must* read her Bible on a daily basis at all.

The opposite of legalism is license, that is, living as though freedom in Christ means there are *no* measurable standards of spirituality. License leads a person to presume he can be faithful to the Lord's word in 1 Timothy 4:7, even if he *never* reads the Bible again.

The spiritually disciplined Christian life should be lived between these two errors. On the one hand, because of the grace of God experienced through Christ, believers are free from keeping manmade rules as a way of keeping the love of God. "Stand fast therefore," says Galatians 5:1, "in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage."

On the other hand, because of the same heart-changing grace of God at work in us "both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13), we sincerely *want* to discipline ourselves to pursue godliness. And the fact of the matter is that these biblical disciplines (such as Bible intake, prayer, worship, fellowship, stewardship and fasting) can all be measured in one way or another. What matters is why we measure them. If

it's to reassure ourselves of our soul's condition based on our external performance, then we're acting like Pharisees.

But if we measure particular aspects of our disciplines in order to simplify our spiritual lives or to hold ourselves accountable to certain goals, then there may be real benefits. So a person might try to read a given number of chapters in the Bible daily in order to avoid deciding every single day how much to read, and/or to keep pace for reading through the Bible in a year.

Not even the most rigorous practice of the spiritual disciplines is legalistic when the motives of our spirituality are what they should be, namely to do all to the glory of God and to pursue Christlikeness.

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