

HABIT THREE

Exercise Self-Control

“... make every effort to add ... self-control ... for if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive ...”

II Peter 1:5-9

This book draws from my experiences on three continents and important lessons from the Bible. We explore the theme of increased effectiveness in the vital areas of personal development, prayer, fasting, health, finances, marriage, parenting, leading people to Jesus, and obedience to and perseverance for God. We have already observed that disciplining ourselves to learn through our experiences produces personal growth. Now, this chapter more fully introduces the theme of self-control. And then throughout this study, we'll look at varied practical applications of self-control. Without self-control, we cannot become our best possible self.

Disciplining ourselves in our service to God requires us to supervise ourselves. Christians do not punch time cards, nor do they have a supervisor requiring daily records of time spent on projects. In Christian ministry, we need to be self-starters. It is easy to be undisciplined. If we grumble instead of learn, or sleep instead of pray, no one will “tell on us.” No one needs to tell our “boss” — He already knows. However, in whatever culture you

live, those who are willing to discipline themselves are successful in the end.

Self-discipline is a lifestyle. Discipline in one area of our lives enhances a desire for discipline in others. Striving to be our best for God's glory makes us aware of the interconnectedness of self-discipline from one area to another. Good habits in one

area of our lives make other areas more peaceful and productive. Once we experience the benefits of routine and order in one part of our lives, we soon desire those benefits in other less effective areas.

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Advantages of Routine

Aren't you glad you don't have to decide when, where, or how to fix your hair every day? Isn't it easier when you don't have to decide when, where, or how to shave or trim your beard every day? Just go on a camping trip that disrupts these normal routines and forces you to take time to think about how to even do them. It will remind you how much time is absorbed in making trivial decisions. Routines can serve good, timesaving purposes, and we should not hesitate to establish good ones. If routines are timesavers in the small issues of life, then they can be even greater timesavers in the larger issues.

With routines, you can think through, decide upon once, and then implement them daily, weekly, or annually. In deciding what habits to form, your value system moves into action. Once you choose a routine, it becomes a matter of following through. I used to hate trips to the dentist. I usually had a tooth or two that needed to be filled, and I disliked the lecture on flossing my teeth! In the spring of 1983 when we were on furlough, I had extensive cosmetic dental work done. After that, I decided to increase my tooth-brushing routine to twice a day and floss regularly. I did not have a cavity for 19 years after that. While I wish I had made that decision earlier in life, I am glad I made it as soon as I did. I never have to wrestle with the decision of whether to brush or floss. I do it regularly because of the decision I made one time. This may seem like a trite illustration of a simple truth, but it illustrates the value of routine.

Fundamentals are the foundation of good routines. Emotions and feelings are usually less dependable influencers of good decisions. This chapter offers several areas to thoughtfully evaluate. As you chart your course, make careful decisions based on fundamentals, not by simply flowing with your emotions.

After you make each intentional, deliberate decision, make one more — choose to follow through. Good decisions enable us to fly on automatic pilot to our destination. For example, this is my typical routine: rise early in the morning, pray, read the Bible, fast one day a week, study, prepare for classes, maintain office hours, return phone calls, play basketball or run, workout, and rest on Sundays. This routine provides me a healthy and highly beneficial lifestyle.

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On Thinking and Gazing

I decided once that I will not dwell on evil thoughts. I have applied this decision many times. The Scripture is clear that we should “demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (II Corinthians 10:5). I decided this ahead of time. Now, when I experience an evil thought, I activate my plan of prayer, self-control, spiritual discipline, and reliance upon God. Even during prayer — alone or in groups — I have evil or vulgar thoughts. I decided in advance that when they come to me, I will resist, fight against, and overcome them.

Some say that while demons cannot know all our thoughts, they can influence our thoughts. This means that demons may place some thoughts in our minds — probably the ones we don’t want. We need to boot them out. Controlling our thoughts requires self-control. Demons probably do not have as much power or authority to tempt us with evil thoughts as some demon-fearing Christians suggest. However, demons seem to hitchhike on thoughts produced by fertile human and evil imaginations. They try to make the evil thoughts worse or more prolonged than we, in our desires for purity and righteousness, would have done on our own. We must oppose them.

With my own fertile imagination, I create enough evil thoughts on my own without the devil's help. He has the ability to hitchhike on my smallest evil contemplation and transform it into a major evil thought. I decided to strive to cast both the thought that gave him entry and the hitchhiker out of my mind. Our journey down life's highway is much smoother without undesirable traveling companions. As the devil overplays his hand, he increases the presence of evil. When I identify his evil, I push vigorously in the other direction. In the confusion of enjoying and hating the evil thought, we lose the ability to decide anything. I find it is easier to implement a decision I have chosen in advance than to make a good one under such pressure. My prior decision controls my thoughts — and my gaze.

My model in trying to control my gaze comes from a chapter in which Job declares his ethic: "I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl" (Job 31:1). What a great example! Sometimes the female students with whom I work at the university do not make this easy. I would like to think they would not wear low necklines or tight-fitting clothes if they knew what a problem this caused for men. Nevertheless, I am convicted to control my gaze and my thoughts. I decided some time ago that when speaking with women, I will keep my eyes on theirs and not look any lower. I have kicked the plan into action with a second's notice numerous times. At the same time, if lustful thoughts occur, I try to see the woman's spirit, love it, and pray for it as God would have me do. I also decided that if I have trouble doing that, I would tell my wife, Char, and ask her to pray with me about it. She has been most helpful during these times, and I am always glad I have been transparent with her.

Here is an example of the value of making the decision ahead of time and merely disciplining ourselves to follow through when circumstances are beyond our control. In the university where I serve, we have a copy center with three lines where students and faculty wait for service. One time, I had reached the counter and was waiting for my copies when one of my former graduate students came up to speak with me. The level of her neckline made me glad I had decided ahead of time to keep my eyes on hers

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and maintain a proper attitude toward God's daughters. I felt some comfort, too, during my prayer time with Char that evening. In the emotion, excitement, or entertainment of the moment, we are in poor shape to make important decisions. We can agree with Job. We can make a covenant with our eyes. That is our thoughtful decision. From then on, we will merely follow through which we can also decide in advance to do automatically.

Ready to Fast

Chapters 5 and 6 cover fasting more thoroughly and Chapter 12 goes into depth on eating habits and health issues. However, we address one aspect of eating habits here because it relates to self-discipline and affects our readiness to fast. It relates to the consumption of stimulants and chemicals.

Some people recommend avoiding coffee for several days before fasting. This enables the body to become less dependent on the stimulant of caffeine and eases the transition into going without food. Steering clear of coffee ahead of time is better than going off coffee, sugars, and food all at the same time. Headaches caused by caffeine withdrawal during the first day or two of the fast are uncomfortable and distracting. It is better, however, to prevent dependence on sugar or caffeine in the first place. That way, you are really free.

I recently did a three-day fast. Char was gone to visit our kids in Alaska to help welcome our new granddaughter into our family. I was on spring break and had complete control over my work schedule during that week. I woke up on that first Saturday and realized I was free to fast for the next three days if I chose. Because I do not eat sugar, there was no "sugar withdrawal" headache. Because I do not drink coffee or cola, I had no caffeine withdrawal either. I was ready to go on a three-day fast without the advance preparation of avoiding caffeine or sugar. By eating nourishing food and avoiding stimulants, it is easier to fast — whether it is a weekly one-day fast or annual three-day fast.

Some people do not fast because they have such a difficult time the first day getting off chemicals. Being on chemicals may not be such a good choice in the first place. It depends on how much value you place on the spiritual alertness that fasting provides. If it burdens you to live a lifestyle that makes fasting less difficult, the only excuse you need to remain unprepared is simply, "Fasting is not worth that much to me."

It may not be easy, but fasting produces marvelous results. Fasting makes focusing on prayer, understanding the Word, and hearing God's voice easier. Fasting takes discipline — making the decision to fast and following through takes discipline. However, fasting is not as difficult as we have made it. The problem is that regularly consuming chemicals and stimulants makes fasting more difficult. The problem shows up when we fast, but it is not essentially a fasting problem; it is a problem of poor eating habits.

Chapter 5 is devoted to fasting so we won't go into more detail here. Just remember that self-control and personal discipline exercised in one area of our lives positively affects other areas. I learned to discipline myself in regular prayer before I began to fast regularly each week. By the time I formed one habit, I was ready to form another good one. Disciplining myself to eat properly every day prepares me to fast when I am ready. A mind-over-matter — decision-over-appetite — mentality results from disciplining ourselves to eat correctly. Unfortunately, dependence on food sugars and caffeine robs some people of the joys and victories of fasting. Fasting is so important and beneficial that it is worth regulating our daily diet so we can do it more easily.

The self-control we exercise and the victory over appetite we gain through fasting, while significant itself, is only a part of the bigger victory: our spirits are in control; our bodies are not. Food will serve us; we will not let it control us. We can say, "It is worth that much to me."

Deciding How Much to Pray

Regularity of prayer is possibly the most important arena in which we need self-discipline. In my early years of Bible college, my parents gave me two books on prayer written by Leonard Ravenhill that influenced me tremendously. If you can find them, read them. One book was titled *Why Revival Tarries* and the other was *Meat for Men*. In a letter from my dad I received around the same time, he suggested that I make a habit of praying one hour each day. I have always thought it was interesting that God used that letter from my father to influence me so strongly. To my knowledge, my dad did not have that habit. My dad was a good man, but Mom had more spiritual power and insight than he did. Anyway, the combined influence of Ravenhill's books and Dad's suggestion inspired me to start a habit I have maintained since my sophomore year in Bible college (1963 to 1964).

I do not remember when I changed, but I soon jumped from one hour per day to two hours per day. I have maintained that level more or less over the years. I recommend determining how long you are going to pray each day. Do not pray only as long as you feel like it. There may be some exceptions among us, but most of us will pray more regularly if we commit to specific times for prayer. We will also pray longer than if we stopped when we felt like it.

Jesus invited his disciples to pray with him for an hour. Author David Wilkerson suggests we tithe our time — that would mean taking 2 hours and 24 minutes per day. I chose to pray two hours each morning. Decide what is best for you, and then all you have to do is discipline yourself to follow through on your decision.

In order to do this, you may have to cut back on time spent on less valuable activities. I have never watched television much. When we were children, we didn't have one because Mom and Dad didn't feel we should. As a result, I have never had to wean myself off television, but I understand some people do. I decided the length of my daily prayer time at age 19, so I had the advantage of fewer unhealthy habits to break in order to establish this good one. It is easier to establish good habits earlier in life than later. Regular time for prayer is possibly the best habit I have. Out of it flows many other good habits that have also been a great blessing in my life. Of course, clocking so many hours in prayer is not the point; praying is.

During the time we set aside to pray, we must also exercise discipline to focus on what we are doing. This is true whether we pray with the special prompting of the Holy Spirit or pray through our normal routines. Keeping our minds focused on prayer the whole time takes self-control and discipline. In Chapter 5, we will notice that praying through the six parts of the Lord's Prayer according to Larry Lea's formula has been a great help to many. That keeps us focused and moving from subject to subject. Deciding how long we will pray encourages us to pray more because we become accustomed to fully using the time we set aside. The purpose of allotting time is to increase prayer. We will make the most of whatever aids us to pray more or better.

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In deciding when and how much to pray and then disciplining yourself to follow through, allow yourself the freedom to reevaluate and modify your routine. I once decided that I needed to get up at about 5:30 a.m. to spend more time in prayer. After four days, I was so tired I was unable to pray or do anything else. I decided I needed to go back to getting a better night's rest so I could pray with a rested body and focused mind. Some great prayer warriors have been able to pray very early in the morning, but everyone needs to find out what works best for them in keeping with how God made us.

When I run marathons, I run as fast as I can at a pace I can maintain for the entire race. If I go any faster, my legs begin to cramp or some other indicator reminds me not to go so fast. If I lose focus and slow down too much, I know I am not doing my utmost and my time will not be good for that race. I have learned to listen to my body and go as fast as I can at a maintainable pace. I have disciplined myself not to run too fast during the first 20 miles of the race. Maintaining speed throughout the race is much more important than going fast. Regular prayer times and other disciplines in a Christian's life are, once again, more like a marathon than a sprint. Find the best pace that you can maintain and stay with it.

Bible Reading

Since the summer of 1963, I have made it a habit to read the Bible all the way through each year. I established that habit after reading *Through Gates of Splendor* by Elisabeth Elliot. In that book, she told of how her husband, Jim Elliot, loved the Bible and read it regularly. Actually, I established both my habit of reading the Bible all the way through each year and my habit of praying an hour each day about the same time. I went through a significant spiritual change that summer and decided that spiritual pursuits were more important than other things. Regular prayer and Bible-reading habits were the practical workings of my positive shift in values. As a result, since the summer of 1963, I have enjoyed my daily sessions with the Lord. I don't have to decide each day to do this — I merely act on a previously made decision. I have often picked up something from that day's reading that was immediately helpful to me.

My Bible has 1,094 pages of Scripture text. If I read three pages per weekday and four pages on Sundays, I can read the whole Bible in 365 days. Consider dividing the number of pages in

your Bible by 365 to determine your own plan. There are annual Bible reading charts available and even a chronological Bible that is divided into daily reading portions that guide the reader through it each year. The important lesson is not about choosing the method. It is about disciplining ourselves to regularly submit to the teachings of Scripture. Some parts of the Bible are not as easy as others. That gives us even more reason to decide to read it all — not just the easy or favorite parts.

God's Spirit speaks through the "written Word" — the Bible. It repeatedly influences our value system personally, accurately, pointedly, and with great encouragement for godly living. Mentally, we are what we read. A routine of reading the Word of God is essential to the development of God's servants.

Avoiding Extremes

This book frequently includes personal anecdotes. They help us understand how to apply biblical principles to daily life. The following narratives, however, illustrate when *not* to apply self-discipline — times when God wants us to let go and have fun. Self-discipline is a good thing, but even it requires discerning applications, moderation, and balance.

God gave the human race a great gift in the pleasures of physical intimacy in marriage. However, some well-intended and good people, have exercised discipline — actually unnecessary austerity — by denying themselves a blessing God wants for us in our marriages. There is a place for mutually agreed abstinence for a specific time and purpose, but that is not the point I am addressing here. Hebrews 13:4 says, "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure ..." In most translations, this verse is rendered as a command, but according to Greek grammar, it could be a statement as well as a command. "Marriage is honored by all, and the marriage bed is pure," is, therefore, another possible translation. Morally, the marriage bed *should* be kept pure. On the other hand, in many Christian marriages, it simply *is* the case. That we *keep* it pure is also necessary, but that it *is* pure is an even more fundamental truth. There would be greater satisfaction in marriages, less adultery, and fewer divorces if partners would simply loosen up with greater freedom and creativity.

The graphic instructions in Proverbs and the Song of Solomon are very clear. Scripture encourages marriage partners to enjoy

each other's bodies. God intended physical intimacy to be an enjoyable, often-repeated experience. This gift is too wonderful to refuse and too valuable to allow Satan to steal. In physical intimacy, marriage partners should relax, be creative, and take their time as often as they both agree, and have fun.

When marriage is entered with purity and innocence, the experiment and discovery process that begins on the wedding night can continue many

years. We should keep these secrets in our own marriages just like we should be chaste, proper, reserved, and strictly self-controlled in our behavior outside of marriage. A rendezvous outside marriage would be less tempting if partners were less reserved and planned more exciting things inside it. As mentioned above, the Bible says marriage is honorable, the bed is pure, and sex is blessed. There are many times and places where

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we should control our urges. However, physical intimacy is one God-blessed and God-given arena where we can enjoy whatever physical liberties both spouses feel comfortable with without any shame before God. My own years of marriage experience have confirmed this line of thought, and the following two sad stories will further reinforce it.

Once when we were home on furlough in the United States, we visited a church in the Midwest. The pastor's wife taught the adult Sunday School class. To illustrate the importance of dedication and prayer, she told the class that she and her husband had agreed to abstain from physical intimacy on Saturday evenings in order to give themselves to prayer for the services the next day. My own inner reaction was something like, "I'm glad we don't have that policy, but they must be really dedicated." Many years later, I learned that the pastor had had an adulterous affair that split the church. There are surely other factors I do not know, so I hesitate to make a judgment. However, I have always wondered if their self-control (which is acceptable to God) evolved into extreme self-denial and austerity — potentially a tool of the enemy. In our own endeavors to

avoid that couple's tragedy in our marriages, it is better to enjoy many happy private parties.

During my youth, I sought the counsel of an esteemed and godly man I greatly respect. I was struggling with sexuality, a problem for most normal single young men who value sexual purity. My counselor assured me that self-control was still necessary even after marriage. One was not free to experience physical intimacy just any time of the day. He explained that work and responsibilities keep married people from physical intimacy even though they may be in the same work or living environment. I did not question his position on the matter for a long time.

A year and a half later while still single, by accident, I learned something that gave me a different perspective on his philosophy. That counselor's Christian wife shared heart-to-heart with me that she had had an affair subsequent to my counseling session with her husband. She told me how her new partner had been so gentle and caring in comparison to her husband's insensitivity to her physical needs. Although he was a godly and devoted husband, he was evidently preoccupied with his work. She felt neglected.

Unfortunately, the counselor's wife handled the situation poorly, but the clear lesson to me is that austerity — unnecessary self-denial — can make people more vulnerable. Because of this unsought first-hand information, I learned this important lesson. Seemingly wonderful and idealistic dedication to the Lord's work can contribute to if not produce a situation for moral tragedy. What I originally interpreted as godly self-control had evidently slipped across the line into my counselor's unnecessary austerity. I determined that I would follow that counselor's advice and godly example on all points except one — declining the joy of physical intimacy “just any time of the day.” I understood from their sad experience the legitimacy of physical intimacy during the day. This perspective has added many happy experiences to the joys of my own marriage.

You might question the appropriateness of my exchange with my counselor's wife. Being a young man at the time, I did not realize that I was engaged in a risky dialogue. Single or married, a man should not have a lengthy discussion on sexual issues alone with anyone but his wife. If two people agree to discuss this topic, another woman should also be present. Here is why this type of conversation leaves us vulnerable. In discussing intimate things with members of the opposite sex, we mentally enter into an intimate, interpersonal zone. When that

conversation involves people we are not married to, it makes being alone together inappropriate. Christians must exercise self-discipline to avoid such a potentially destructive situation.

Most of us are exposed to temptation and work long hours. We often go to bed exhausted, having worked all evening after having worked all day. We should be at liberty to have some daytime secrets in our own houses with our spouses. God expects us to be dedicated and zealous for His causes. Nevertheless, our enemy is clever enough to use our dedication and zeal against us to rob us. The enemy targets some of the joys that help us serve God with contentment, satisfaction, and purity for a lifetime. God is, after all, the One who created our bodies with their fascinating parts, interesting functions, and capacities for joyous celebrations and private ecstatic escapes from heavy public responsibilities.

My main emphasis in this chapter has been to encourage you to increase order and effectiveness as a Christian by making thoughtful and careful decisions. From then on, we merely act on previously made decisions; follow the plan; and fly on automatic pilot.

However, we are not machines. We have emotions for which we must make allowances. Schedules and sleeping patterns are not always completely under our control. In those instances, we need to be flexible. There are times when people have needs that are simply more important than our well-organized plans and routines. Learning how to recognize when a situation is exceptional is a skill in itself. Knowing when we should set the routine aside and go with the flow is a challenge. In my own routine, there are probably a few times each month when I need to do that. We should be okay with exceptions, but the rule of thumb remains: an exception, in order to be an exception, must be an exception.

The fruit of the spirit of self-control is the key to a well-ordered, effective Christian life. God wants His servants to enjoy the benefits of order, so He teaches us to take captive of every thought and control ourselves. He wants us to enjoy growth, fruitfulness, contentment, peace, and increased opportunities to receive fresh insights from heaven. He knows self-control is the

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key. We too often know more about what we should do than we are doing. As a result, we experience an unnecessary gap between our performance and our potential. The key to reducing or closing that gap is self-control. Potential, by definition, is something that we can achieve, and self-control makes the big difference. Our potential is what we could do. As stewards of our talents, what we could do we should do. In other words, we can do it if we will do it. That is why this fruit of the spirit is so valuable.

