

DISCIPLINE
An objection to the Christian way, though not always frankly expressed, is the repugnance to discipline. "Do this", "don't do that" advice is rarely welcome and Christianity seems to involve a significant amount of it.

if a real liberal looking - a free way
Meditating on this as I was driving en route from San Francisco to Auburn I thought of the requirement for discipline made upon atheists and believers alike on the highway of life. For example, I was on the outer lane and on my left was sheer darkness. I wondered what was out there, could a car drive there safely? Then, when wishing to return to the lane on my right, the glare of lights behind warned me that I could not do just what I liked, wise restraint had to be exercised in order to avoid an accident, I had to wait until it was safe to move over. Then, despite the lateness of the hour, the accelerator had to be guarded and not given free reign according to my hurry temperament. Not only the rules of safety but the guardians of the law could be affronted, and worst of all, life taken unnecessarily, my own or that of other people. There was no avoiding discipline on the highway.

A few hours earlier waiting for a friend from Russia the quarter hour periods slipped by. Everyone MUST be through Customs by now. They had been coming through for what seemed an hour but no one had appeared for fifteen minutes. A host of good reasons said "Stay! Don't run off, regardless of appearances." Then ultimately she appeared, and in tears, for the Customs had on this occasion not been as courteous as they should have been. Some argument over the dating of the visa which was in harmony with the law but only just so. I guess our friend had been forced to discipline her tongue under the circumstances, again for many reasons.

the opportunity
Earlier that day, contemplating about six hours in the car and an hour or so waiting at the airport it was obvious that if the day was not to be completely sedentary, exercise must be taken in the early morning despite the habit of leaving it chiefly to the second half of the day. Even that reversal called for a modicum of discipline.

~~Then~~ I think of approximately fifty million American women worried about their figures. What restraint they exercise at the table. Some of us who are fairly physically active wolf down food in impressive amounts but not these ladies. No, for them, the word is discipline beginning with the same letter as diet and daintiness.

Most families have one or more dysfunctional members off and on--for all of us are at times dysfunctional. It leads to home pressures and an uneven carrying of burdens done gladly most times for love's sake, but on occasions chafed under. The tongue which has no bones can break bones. Again the word is restraint. Discipline. There is really no dodging it, believer or unbeliever.

Why then complain about discipline in the Christian life? It is an invitation to joy and health, not a note of condemnation. A recent classic on the spiritual life by Richard Shelley Taylor is called THE DISCIPLINED LIFE. In one place the author has this to say:

p 101 re Elizabeth Cole missionary to the lepers in South Africa

Ultimately, ...she found glorious happiness, far richer and deeper than she had ever known in her carefree days on the hills of Montana; but she couldn't foresee such happiness when she first confronted God's plan. p 101

Back to the highway. As I speed through the night with a constant stream of traffic before and behind and on either side I notice that soon I must turn off for Redding, exit two miles. I must get over to the lane from which exit must be made. And I must do so in time or I will be carried beyond the exit and have to go on perhaps for miles unnecessarily and then retrace my travel. It takes discipline to travel successfully, even to drive a highway. And a moment's failure could mean loss of time or it could mean a fine and a court case, or it could mean death. For example, I would like to find the Christian radio station but it takes some jiggling and I can only do it by glancing down. Glancing down may be safe nine times out of ten, but what if it is the tenth time. Or maybe I am eating lunch as I travel---and I cannot feel that mandarin I brought. If I look down I shall no doubt see it, but should I look down. Again it may be safe nine times out of ten. A sort of Russian roulette.

Remember climbing up cliffs before the days of rock climbing with ropes? We climbed small cliffs without ropes and with considerable fear. One wrong placement of the foot could finish the day's sport, or finish sport for months, or forever. What, can't I even have a sport without discipline? Nope. Not unless you are playing something like Patience with cards, or Ludo, where you don't particularly care about the outcome.

And here's a minister. It is his joy to serve others and this includes counselling--of both sexes. Discipline may not be needed, not discipline of a very intense nature, as he counsels the very very old who have now been semi stationary for years. Rocking chair motion if at all. Maybe they are not only sans sight, sans taste but also sans hearing. They just know that the minister has come to show his love and respect and it makes them happy whether or not they can hear all his words. Perhaps the minister's attention could wander a little as he passed the time of day or even as he uttered spiritual platitudes--he knows he is not being altogether heard. But what if he is asked to counsel this attractive and unattached lady? Unless he is a very unusual man he will need a measure of discipline in this case---as he chooses the milieu for the counselling, the hour, etc etc. "She hath cast down many wounded...yea, many strong men have been slain by her." And the reverse is true if not more true---men have wrought the devastation of women.

Now here I am again out of my depth. This time I am where I hate to be---at a car workshop getting prices for work to be done. The man is an idiot if he does not perceive that I know nothing about cars, mechanics, or repair prices. And as I struggle to offset this liability it will take discipline to thread my way between being as wise as a serpent and as harmless as a dove. My wife says I sound truculent and almost menacing as I say that I will get another quote elsewhere if the first seems excessive. But it is a scared man talking--one scared of waste and of being cheated. It takes discipline to do the right thing when one is out of one's depth.

End is there none to the need for discipline. If I don't plan today aright I will be quite unfit for the serious work of tomorrow. Even in my recreation I have to be beware lest it become wreckage. And what about mealtimes--this social hour characterized by the throwing off of anxious care and assuming the pose of a relaxed soul on holiday. Alas, even here according to Solomon there is need for discipline. See Prov 23:1. And 1 Cor 10:34

Now I am conversing with someone I have not met before. I must beware of diarrhoea of the mouth, of intemperate speech. It is better to listen than to give the sacrifice of fools, says the wise king of Israel. Eric Hoffer after a day with two intelligent visitors from abroad berated himself for his own wordiness and his failure to discipline his tongue and listen.

Can I ever be free of discipline? Of course there is, every night from the time I ~~yes~~ surrender consciousness to the time it returns. Note we did not say as soon as your head hits the pillow. For that is often the signal for roving thoughts of worry etc etc. It takes special discipline to resist worry and to live one day at a time even in one's thoughts.

It's not quite as bad as it sounds, for the law of habit comes to our assistance mightily. Things get easier with the continued doing. Once it was a problem for me to fit in exercise. Now I am uneasy if it does not ~~work~~ fit into my program naturally. These days it would be a very rare thing to omit physical activity whereas, for years, long long ago I never even thought about it. And so it is in a thousand areas. With some things I have found it easier to abstain than to be temperate--I am a weakling. Take chocolate, for instance. I mean it, take it, for I cannot be temperate with it. You have it. But it's no longer a great battle. Habit has won it for me.

Even such things as the discipline of the tongue can become a matter of habit. ~~The tongue has no bones but it breaks plenty. But~~ cultivate the habit of speaking all the good you can truthfully utter, ~~and~~ simultaneously restraining evil or malicious or careless gossip. This too can become an *automatic discipline* habit though this writer confesses that he is yet a long way short of the goal.

Prayer! That for some people is the most difficult of all disciplines. Lord, forgive my harsh words today and help me--drat it, there's the telephone. Mary is answering it, bless her. What would I do without her. And just think how that rascal Randy Topheavy almost won her because she did not see through him. At least that's one good thing I have done--saving Mary from Randy. Where was I Lord, oh yes, help me not to say negative things even about the people who deserve them unless I'm safeguarding someone from evil or deception--my stomach hurts. I'm sure antacids aren't good to use regularly. Could be an ulcer. Could be worse. Life is full of aches and pains. Oh, yes, Lord, I'm sorry. About this matter of speech. Sorry, Lord, I've got to go or I'll be off to work without breakfast. We'll catch up another time. Goodbye. Coming Mary. . . ."

No wonder the apostle challenges us to "work out our own salvation with fear and trembling" but let us not forget what he says before and after

that. The beginning of that chapter invites us to consider the wonder of the lowly Son of God who stooped low to take humanity and took upon himself not just the form of a human but the form of a slave and was obedient not just with the run of the mill things but obedient even unto death. Consider him and let this mind be in you that was in him....All that comes before. And now for after. Yes, The text continues by saying "for it is God that worketh in you to will and to do...." That's good. Did you get it."in us. Its not ALL up to us: its true that without Him we cannot, and without us, he will not, but we are never on our own. And we are wholly dependent upon him for the initiation of every good thought, He works in us to will--that's great. He changes my likes and my wants and my will. Doesn't force me, mind, but courts, woos, captivates, charms me till I see the better and love it and choose it---to will AND TO DO That's great too, for I am a natural messier. But this says He will work in me to DO. He doesn't leave me to myself.

Maybe the most significant matter in this business of discipline is being motivated. And that motivation comes from the Christ of the cross. Faith, hope, love, are the great motive powers of the soul and it is Christ who is the fount of these three sisterly virtues. Whatever gets my attention gets me---that Christ might have my attention! Maybe that's the chief area where I need discipline and maybe if by his help I am led to discipline in this area and enabled by his grace to practise it, maybe then the other disciplines, one by one will follow naturally. No maybe about it--that good news is the fruit of the best news ever that "this man receiveth sinners" and "whosever will may come" for "he (has come and) gone to be the guest of him that is a sinner." Alleluia!