

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
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Staying Spiritually Fit

1 Timothy 4:6-16

Key verse: “Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching” (1 Timothy 4:16).

Most people remember actor Sylvester Stallone for his portrayal of come-back boxer Rocky Balboa in the Rocky films. In a 2006 interview, Stallone shared about his return to the Christian faith. He talked about having lost his way and having made “a lot of bad choices.” But in recent years, Stallone said, he had been increasingly pulled back to his Christian heritage.

He also said that one of his poor life choices had been his decision to neglect worship and the influence of the church. “You need to have the expertise and the guidance of someone else,” he said. “You cannot train yourself. I feel the same way about Christianity and about what the church is: The church is the gym of the soul.”

“Train yourself in godliness,” Paul writes to Timothy (4:7). Then, because human beings need motivation to train diligently—whether it be physical or spiritual training—Paul offers this incentive: “While physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come” (v. 8).

The benefits of regular exercise and a proper diet become more apparent each year. Taking care of our physical health is a good and important thing, no doubt. But Paul argues that taking care of our spiritual health and development is even more important, because it has value both for this present life and also for the life to come.

In his “General Rules for the People Called Methodists,” Methodism’s founder John Wesley urged training in godliness through: “the public worship of God; the ministry of the Word, either read or expounded; the Supper of the Lord; family and private prayer; searching the Scriptures; fasting or abstinence.” Christians in every age have realized that the Christian life must keep growing if it is to keep going. The follower of Christ has a responsibility to get the spiritual “diet and exercise” needed to have a healthy and growing spiritual life.

In this passage, 1 Timothy 4:6-16, Paul gives godly advice to Timothy regarding his leadership role in the church. Timothy had been set apart as a leader in the church (v. 14). Yet, this advice is good for every Christian because every Christian is

called to lead in some capacity—in a church ministry team or committee, a Sunday School class or small group, or in the home and community.

Throughout much of this passage, Paul's leadership advice concerns both the leader's *personal life and character* as well as the leader's *public ministry*. In verse 12, for example, Timothy is challenged to be "an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity." If a Christian leader fails to be an "example" in his or her personal life and character, that leader's public ministry will lack credibility. As someone wisely said, "I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day."

This character challenge is immediately followed by Paul's instructions for public ministry: "Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching" (v. 13).

Verse 16 follows this pattern again, with the challenge to "pay close attention to yourself" [that is, your personal life and character] "and to your teaching" [that is, your public ministry]. This challenge again concludes with a motivation or incentive to faithfulness: "for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers."

The question may be asked, "How does *grace* fit into this call to a regimen of training for spiritual health and ministry effectiveness?" Theology professor Bradley Nassif has said, "Grace is opposed to merit, but it is not opposed to effort." Salvation is a free gift, received by faith. But having become a Christian, one is called to a life of spiritual discipline, growth, and service.

How are you doing with your spiritual training? During this season of Lent, we remember that Christians through the ages have practiced the spiritual disciplines of *prayer, fasting, worship, study of Scripture, and service* as ways to prepare spiritually for the celebration of Jesus' resurrection. May you discover the transforming grace of Christ in new and life-changing ways during this holy season! "Train yourself in godliness, for, while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come."

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