

The Value of Godliness

SCOTT HOEZEE

Even people who are moderately athletic, much less those of us who are not terribly athletic at all, marvel at the discipline that goes into training to become an Olympic athlete. The gold medal swimmer, Michael Phelps, used to swim 50 miles every week, one lap after another, in the pool. He did weight training, chin-ups, push-ups; he used to eat twelve thousand calories per day – six times more than the average adult should eat – but he burned the calories off daily. Well, even the ancient Greco-Roman world knew something about that kind of athletic discipline, but the Apostle Paul knew of something even better, even more long-lasting in its effect; and that something was captured in one of the early faithful sayings that circulated in the First Century Church. Today on Groundwork, we will dig into that saying. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, we are continuing... this is our third program of looking at these faithful sayings, five of which are scattered in the last letters Paul wrote, the two to Timothy and the letter to Titus, both pastors. Timothy, whom we will be thinking about again today, laboring in the city of Ephesus as a pastor; and so Paul is quoting some of these then common little sayings that the Church came up with as ways to memorize core truths, and kind of putting his apostolic stamp of approval on some of those.

DAVE BAST

Right; and today we come to the third saying in our series. We are just taking them in biblical order, the order that they occur in I and II Timothy and Titus. This one is from I Timothy 4, beginning at verse 1, and in it Paul uses an analogy, or makes a kind of a comparison argument with physical training.

The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. ²Such teachings come through hypocritical liars whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. ³They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. ⁴For everything God created is good and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving ⁵because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁶If you point these things out to the brothers and sisters you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, nourished on the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you followed. ⁷Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. ⁸For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. ⁹This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, there it is. It comes at the very end of a fairly long and complicated passage with a lot of interesting stuff in it, but it says physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is, apparently... Sometimes Paul goes up front, saying, “Here is a trustworthy saying,” and then quotes it. Here he quotes it first and then at the end says, “This is a trustworthy saying,” and that appears to be it, the line you just said.

The first one we looked at was quite short: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. This was a little bit longer, and it might be interesting just to wonder a little bit – speculate a little bit – where this came from. One of the things we said in the first program in this series is that these faithful sayings are like windows on time. This shows us what the earliest believers thought was really, really important and core to the faith. We might not think that this would be one of those things, but obviously they did, and we could wonder a little bit about why this might have been something they wanted to emphasize for themselves, but also for their surrounding culture.

DAVE BAST

Right. I actually think we could excerpt out and maybe boil this down or simplify it; and we should talk about the peripheral statements; but to my mind, the key, pithy phrase – the thing you can memorize and bring up again and again is: Train yourself to be godly. That is the great word – that is the faithful saying: Train yourself to be godly; and then Paul uses a lot of illustrative material around that; and he introduces it by talking about false teachers in pretty strong terms. I mean, he calls them liars and demonic and teachings that come from demons and their consciences are seared like with a hot iron. It is some pretty harsh language there, and interestingly, you might hear that and think: Now, okay, who is doing this? What are they teaching that is so terrible, so demonic? It must be something about go crazy, go wild, go have sex, or something like that, but actually Paul says no, it was the opposite. These are people who are teaching that you cannot have and enjoy the good things that God has given in His creation. They are saying you cannot get married. You cannot eat certain foods. They are legalists who are trying to promote a certain kind of extreme sort of spiritual approach to life.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and Paul was saying here to Timothy, and we noted this in an earlier program, too: Ephesus was a tough city; it was a secular city – a hardcore, secular city. Odds against the Gospel seemed long, and Paul is saying: Here is another thing, Timothy, that is so common – all of these myths and these legalists – what in the world could you do for yourself; what in the world could you do to encourage your people to keep their heads clear and not get snagged by all of this, and Paul says: There is an analogy in athletic training, because you know how this culture, Timothy, idolizes the well-sculpted physique and Olympic athletes. I mean, they did not have Sports Illustrated and GQ and Glamour on the newsstands of Ephesus, but if those magazines had been available in Ephesus, they would have been hot sellers; and so, Paul starts to say: You know, look at all the energy people put into training their bodies. What if we put equal energy into training our hearts and our souls? I bet it will help us combat all of these old wives tales and these myths and these austere, overly esthetic people who are trying to cloud peoples’ minds with a lot of other stuff.

DAVE BAST

Right. There is clear evidence in the Greco-Roman world that they... In one sense, they worshipped the human body. I mean, all you have to do is go to a really good museum like the Louvre in Paris or some other great museum, and look at the ancient sculptures that came from the Greek world especially, and Ephesus was, incidentally, a Greek city; even though it was in present-day Turkey, it was culturally Greek. They idealized the human form, both male and female. They worshipped athletes with adulation... kind of like today – there are some very close parallels to today; and Paul is not necessarily knocking sports. He loved sports images. He used them often.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, he did.

DAVE BAST

What he is saying is: Hey, let's put this into perspective. It is all well and good to be fit and get into shape, but it is even better to get into spiritual shape.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; it has some value, Paul says, but Paul also knows you are still going to die. Old age finds us all. Bodies sag; you energy will flag; you are going to die.

DAVE BAST

Hey, have I shared this before on this program? Years ago I saw a bumper sticker that has stuck with me ever since. It said: Eat right; stay fit; die anyway. And that is the truth.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and that is what Paul is saying; so, now Paul is saying: Is there any kind of training you could do that could get you beyond that point? Well, there is, and we will dig into exactly what he is saying a little bit more in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are looking at a faithful saying as we find it in I Timothy Chapter 4, that relates to Paul saying training physically for being a great athlete has some value, but training in godliness, he says, has eternal value. You can become the best athlete in the world, and as we just said in the last segment, you are still going to die; and in fact, while we are thinking about the fact that you are going to die, is there anything you can train yourself for that will have lasting consequences for eternal life, and Paul says: Yes; training in godliness. As we said, Dave, and as you mentioned in the last segment, too, this is not meant to dismiss the value of being physically fit, much less those who have great gifts and talents as athletes. I mean, they are being good stewards of their talents when they train well. Paul is not knocking that. This is not an excuse for any Christian today to say to somebody: Well, so what that you can jog and run like the wind? I have Jesus in my heart and that is all that matters. No, we are not knocking physical training, but Paul is saying there is another kind of training even better.

DAVE BAST

So, what we want to focus on is what does it mean to train in godliness? I think we will get there eventually, but before we do, maybe we should note something else about the context here and the surrounding things that Paul says. Coming back to these false teachers that he kind of blasts for their ideas that were ascetic – that were world denying, body denying, forbidding marriage, making sure you fasted or did not eat certain things, dietary laws, all that sort of thing. Interestingly, the culture – the pagan culture of Paul's day – on the one hand they worshipped the human body in some respects; on the other hand, they had kind of a very negative attitude toward it. Scholars talk about Gnosticism, the sort of philosophy/theology – the religion of the day, which was very world denying, very body denying, and said: You should just be a pure spirit and kind of live on the air; and there are still some sort of similar philosophies today; and Paul is rejecting both those things. Do not worship the body. Do not totally deny the body. Everything God has created is good; it is to be received with thanks if it comes from Him; but meanwhile, move on to a higher thing and train your body and your spirit in godliness.

SCOTT HOEZEE

0:11:17.5] Yes; have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives tales, rather train yourself to be godly; that is I Timothy 4:7. Then as now, there are a lot of very funny, sometimes kind of crazy, sometimes kind of nutty ideas that float around in any given culture: Wrong-headed definitions of success; wrong-headed

definitions of what you have to do or should do to be happy; all kinds of myths, Paul is saying; and if he were alive today he would point out a bunch of ours, and he would say: How do you combat that? Well, the problem, Paul says, is that all of those things distract you from what really matters. The things that people hyperventilate about and they jump up and down, today we would say they go on TV, and they go on split-screen TV, and the two people are yelling at each other and half the time what they are getting all excited about just does not amount to a hill of beans in the long run; but what that does is... You know, Neil Postman wrote a book some years ago called *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, where he was saying: We watch all this television, we watch all these debates that are just sound and fury signifying nothing, to quote Shakespeare, and meanwhile, the things that really matter – we do not talk about them at all; and Paul says: You cannot do that. And Timothy, you are a pastor; you cannot let your people do that. You have got to have them train themselves up in what really matters. The Sermon on the Mount – there is enough there to keep you busy for your whole life. Think about that and train yourself to have that kind of perspective on the world as Jesus laid it out.

DAVE BAST

And we want to go on and talk about spiritual training and some of the specifics of it before we end the program, but before we go there, let's talk a little bit, Scott, about that word *godly*, because that is not an adjective that we tend to use anymore very much, is it? I mean, it sounds kind of old fashioned. It is like something you would say about your grandparents: I had very godly grandparents. But today, I wonder how many young people especially aspire to be described as godly; but really, it is a beautiful word, in a sense, and I would suggest that a synonym for it is Christ-like. That might be a little bit more compelling. You just mentioned the Sermon on the Mount, and you think of that, the richness of Jesus' ethical teaching there, for what it means to be one of His followers, for how to shine like a light – like a city on a hill, he says early on – or the light of the world or the salt of the earth. That is really, I think, what it means to be godly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sure. I think what it means is that you habituate yourself to ways of thinking and talking and being, such that you reflect God. To be godly is to be God-like – Christ-like, as you just said, Dave, and that means that you are going to reflect God's patterns for creation. God created things to work a certain way, and when you are a godly person, you both know intuitively how God created something to work and you take delight in having it work that way. It becomes second nature to you, that is what training in godliness is, right? I mean, one of the things that happens on the basketball court when you watch... Years ago when Michael Jordan was the great basketball player, right? People would say: Michael Jordan is so free out on the court. And indeed, he could do things that he did not even have to think about anymore. He could make moves and spin and get that layup up there or do a hook shot or make a move, and it was second nature to him. If he had to think about all that out on the court, he would not be able to play. He would be stuck. Well, that is what Paul is saying. If you train yourself to be godly, you will think God's thoughts after Him naturally. You will not have to think about what is right and what is wrong here, you will know. You will not have to think about the right way or the wrong way to use this particular gift in creation, you will know. It will be second nature.

DAVE BAST

You play like you practice, to continue the sporting analogy; but, I wonder, Scott, you mentioned the Church and some of the things that it seems like are popular teaching today in many churches; and again, I think there is not enough emphasis on godliness as the ultimate goal. You might find seminars on financial success or happiness or how to strengthen your marriage – you know, a lot of good stuff; but training to be godly – training yourself to be godly, this apostolic exhortation – this bit of wisdom from the early Church – one of the things we have said about this series is, this can help us open a window on history and see what the earliest Christians were really concerned about.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, that is right; and in the tradition of the Church, godliness is usually the opposite of worldliness; and what was worldliness, as it has been defined traditionally? Well, it is thinking the way the world thinks. The world says that being successful means you make this much money a year, that becomes your goal. The

world says this is what a successful marriage looks like, that becomes your goal. This is what a successful child looks like, well, you raise your kid that way. That is a worldly way of looking at things; but Paul would say: No, there is a different perspective that you are supposed to have as a Christian – God’s perspective, and it might mean that a lot of what the world values you don’t. You laugh at, you sneer at, you eschew, you do not go for it; and that idea that there is what in the Reformed tradition used to be called the antithesis – that there is a sharp division between the Church and the world – you are right, Dave; I think that has eroded. It is too easy with our computers and our iPads and our cable TV and Netflix, it is too easy to let the world flow right in and color our perspective far more than God’s perspective can flow in.

DAVE BAST

Well, our faithful saying says: Train yourself in godliness; and we have been talking about godliness, and what that means. The clear implication of saying you have to train yourself to do this is that it doesn’t come natural. It takes some work, and that is what we want to focus on next.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork, and this program of a faithful saying that emerges from I Timothy Chapter 4, that Paul says a lot of people in the world spend enormous amounts of time and energy training themselves to be athletes, that has some value, but Timothy, Paul says, eternal value can be found in being trained in godliness. What we want to talk about, Dave, as we close out this program are some nitty-gritty specifics: What does that mean? We know what training for a marathon looks like. People run. They swim. They practice their sport. So, what does training in godliness look like?

DAVE BAST

Well, I think to start with it is going to be something that you do every day; and again, just play with the physical analogy that Paul uses. How do you prepare to run a marathon? Well, you start by running a couple of blocks, if you are really out of shape; and then you work yourself up to a mile or two a day, and you do it every day, day in and day out. Spiritual training is the same way. I mean, it starts with a basic commitment: This is going to become my daily routine. Then you begin to engage in the spiritual disciplines; and actually, we have talked about those before.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, we did a series on Groundwork, and if you go to our website, groundworkonline.com, you can look up that series that aired, where we looked at... I cannot remember – a half-dozen or more spiritual disciplines, and what are the spiritual disciplines? What is spiritually the equivalent of doing layup practice if you are a basketball player, or swimming laps if you are Michael Phelps? They include prayer, of course, scripture reading, meditation, fasting, service, simplicity; and the idea is, as you said, Dave, you do these things – you pray, you read scripture, you think about scripture, you engage in acts of service all with the goal to make these habits. We build up a habitus – we build up stuff that comes as second nature to us.

DAVE BAST

Some of these things can come together, too. I mean, if I could speak personally, I have probably struggled my whole life with discipline, both physical and spiritual. You know, I tend to revert to couch potato mode more easily, more readily; but again, some of the programs that we have done in the past... We did one on scripture and how to meditate on it, and actually how to memorize it, not so long ago; and a wonderful pastor from Holland, Michigan, joined us for that, John Brown; and I have been trying to do some memorizing day by day and be more regular; and I have not only memorized scripture, but I have memorized a prayer – a great, old prayer from the Book of Common Prayer: The Prayer of Confession – and it ends this way: Grant, for Christ’s sake, that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life to the glory of God’s name. And I just think doing that every day – you know, again, there it is right there: Training for godliness. You pray that this would daily become more and more your direction and your focus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sometimes when you talk to people who really are spiritual and they really just seem godly, it is interesting to notice that it is sometimes the simple things that you have rehearsed daily; something as simple as repeating to yourself on a regular basis that very simple Jesus prayer: Jesus Christ, savior of the world, have mercy on me, a sinner. Very simple prayer; I mean, what is that, fifteen words? But to repeat that over and over and over, it becomes second nature for you to look at the world that way, and so that is one thing, certainly – the disciplines. Then a second thing I think we can talk about that emerges from that is this whole second nature thing that we have been talking about.

If you watch Serena Williams play tennis, she gets at some shots, and she does not have time to think about how to hit that ball, she just has to hit it, because she has hit ten thousand shots like that before, so her muscles just sort of do it. Well, if we do steep ourselves in scripture – if we do memorize scripture, Dave, as you were just suggesting – what might start to happen to us? Well, won't we start looking at the world through a different lens? Won't we look at our popular culture? Won't we walk through the shopping mall and see all the false messages – the old wives tales of today – screaming out at us from display case windows, and won't we perhaps point that out to our children or to our spouses or to our friends and say: Look at that. This display case window is preaching a sermon, and it is not the Gospel; and I know that because I have been thinking about the Sermon on the Mount so much that Jesus' upside-down way of looking at life is how I look at life now. And so, it becomes a whole filter for everything that comes to us.

DAVE BAST

A couple of verses of scripture come to mind. One of them, Paul talks in Colossians 3 about setting your minds on the things that are above, and he adds, set your heart on the things – seek the things that are above; so, again, it has to do, as you have been suggesting, with your whole view, with your whole focus – your field of focus; and can you see through the pretensions of the things that are presented to us as being worthy of pursuing in life?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And as you said, it does not come naturally. If it were, we would not have to talk about training even in godliness. You do not get the whole kit and caboodle delivered to you as a package the day you get baptized or the moment you become a Christian; it takes training; and for the same reason that you are never going to play tennis like Serena Williams if you practice one day a week and eat potato chips the other six. Well, so also you are not going to have that Jesus perspective on what you see at the shopping mall if you think about the Bible one day and then spend the other six days just soaking in the mall. That has it the wrong way around, Paul says. You need six days of training, and then take a day off, maybe; but what is in the driver's seat here? What is motivating you?

DAVE BAST

Here, maybe, is a third thing. We talked about habits – daily habits – a mindset that is focused through the lens of scripture – through Jesus' teachings, especially things like the Sermon on the Mount or the things that are above, as Paul says. A third thing is, I think we need to pursue this together. Again, with running, with jogging, it is always easier if you have a buddy to jog with or even a group. I have a friend who continues to pursue running, and they have a set date. He runs on his own, but once a week there are half-a-dozen guys of the same age roughly and they run together. Well, for us, that is Christian worship. That is gathering regularly; and all these things are ways that together we can train ourselves to pursue godliness.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and we would like to know how we can help you dig deeper into the scriptures; so visit that website, groundworkonline.com, and suggest topics and passages for future programs.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/the-value-of-godliness>

Printed on August 15, 2025