

Eight Healthy Spiritual Habits

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3-18-07

Introduction.

- A. Some years ago, I decided that I wanted to write a hymn about the moral attributes that God most wanted Christians to possess. Instead of just making stuff up, I sat down, went through the New Testament, and wrote down every adjective or phrase I found that described a Christian in a complimentary way. After I did that, I began to group what I found into larger categories. Once I found the four biggest categories, I labeled those Verses 1-4 and used the words in each category to shape the content of my hymn.
- B. What was interesting about all of this, though, was not so much the process itself, but the categories at which I arrived. If the Holy Spirit spends the most time on the most important, there are four main virtues that God desires to see in His people. As is hardly surprising, the first of these virtues is love. The second is holiness, which is equally unsurprising. The third is wisdom and spiritual understanding, which, although not as obvious, is still not terribly shocking. However, the fourth is steadfastness, and that, to me, is kind of weird.
- C. As virtues go, steadfastness is fairly granola. We don't write hymns about steadfastness like we do about love and holiness. We rarely say of another Christian, "Wow, he's so steadfast!" If anything, we assume it.
- D. When we do that, though, we sell short one of the most important ideas in the Bible. If we want to go to heaven, we must possess steadfastness. We can start out like gangbusters, with all the love, holiness, and wisdom you can imagine, but if we don't keep doing what is right, that fast start won't mean a thing.
- E. Steadfastness is essential, and we must constantly work on developing it. As is always true in the spiritual realm, however, we're not expected to figure this out on our own. God's word gives us all the guidance we need in how to begin and maintain the practices that will lead us to inherit eternal life. There are many verses to choose from here, but this morning, let's turn to Romans 12 to learn about eight healthy spiritual habits.

I. Diligence, Fervor, Service, Rejoicing.

- A. The passage where we find these eight habits listed is Romans 12:11-13. As is often true in the case of Paul's writing, the first item on the list is also something of a subject heading. We see this heading when Paul describes the faithful Christians as **NOT LAGGING IN DILIGENCE**. It's important, then, not just that we be diligent, but that we strive to maintain the same high level of diligence. It reminds me of something that happened to me in high school. During my senior year, for whatever reason, I decided that I was going to take a strength training class, even though putting me in strength training is about the same thing as putting Forrest Gump in calculus. Worse still, the way my schedule worked out, I ended up taking the class with a bunch of guys who were on the football team. Simply by showing up, they sure showed ME up.
- B. The one exception to that was during the days we spent on distance running. If you think I'm skinny now, you should have seen me then. I could put my hands on my hips and touch my thumbs behind my back. My shoes probably weighed as much as I did, and the fact that I wasn't anything but skin and bone and gristle meant that I could bury all the offensive linemen and whatnot once we started running laps around the track.
- C. Sadly for my self-image, though, not all the football guys in the class were linemen. The starting quarterback also happened to be in the class. He was just as skinny as I was, except with about twice as much muscle. Once the coach started riding him, he was the guy who set the pace in the distance running, and although I could keep up with him for a mile or so, sooner or later, I dropped out. My diligence began to lag.
- D. Now, although that lag in diligence might have bruised my seventeen-year-old's ego back in the day, if we lag in our diligence as Christians now, it's a serious problem. We need to make sure that we have the reserves of willpower that will enable us to maintain and even increase our efforts to serve God. We learn how we can get those reserves in Hebrews 12:1-2. We are to gain encouragement in our spiritual lives by looking to Jesus. This involves not just considering His example, but studying His teaching and seeking His help.
- E. Next, Paul tells us that we should also be **FERVENT IN SPIRIT**. "Fervent" is not a word that we use a whole lot, but we've all seen it. Someone who is fervent is enthusiastic, just bubbling over with excitement about some person or thing. It's an intellectual response, but it's an emotional one too. This is the way we should seek to be about God and His kingdom, not just during momentary spiritual highs, but always, because of our recognition of what great things the Lord has done for us. Consider the fervor of the Jerusalem church described in Acts 2:41-42. These were not people who found Christianity dreary. As we learn in Acts 2:46, they assembled daily in the temple to learn more about God, because that kind of learning excited them. Now, it's certainly not an easy thing to be continually excited about the things of the spirit—at least, I don't find it easy. However, it's something we need to recognize as important and aspire to, because developing that kind of constant fervor is what God wants. Brethren, being a Christian IS exciting. Let's find it exciting.
- F. After this, Paul directs that the Christian be diligent in **SERVING THE LORD**. Now, this might seem just a bit hard to nail down—after all, isn't everything we do as Christians serving the Lord?—but the words of Jesus

help us define this more concretely. Look what He says in John 13:12-15. Some people take this passage and turn foot-washing into a ritual, but washing some church member's clean feet once a year is absolutely not what Jesus has in mind here. He wants us to have the humble attitude of a servant. He wants us to do things for one another that fulfill actual needs, even menial, lowly needs. This is the way we need to live, and we need to live this way because when we look at our brother, we see Jesus, and we want to serve Him.

- G. Fourth, Paul notes that the Christian should be constantly and diligently **REJOICING IN HOPE**. In some ways, this is a difficult concept for our culture to grasp. Too much of the time, Americans are too cynical to engage in unrestrained expressions of joy, and sometimes we assume that anyone who goes around constantly rejoicing must be simple-minded. And yet, this constant rejoicing is what Christians must possess. See what Paul says in Philippians 4:4. Christianity is not a burden. Christianity is not an affliction that robs us of all happiness and makes our lives permanently miserable. If that's what following Jesus means to us, why should we even bother serving God? Just as important, if that's what following Jesus means to us, we're certainly not going to convince others to join in the misery! Instead, Christianity gives us every reason to rejoice. We are blessed above all other men, both in this life and the next, and we need to act like it.

II. Patience, Prayer, Generosity, Hospitality.

- A. After this, Paul comments that we should be **PATIENT IN TRIBULATION**. This is another way that our steadfastness needs to appear: not just when times are outwardly good, but when times are bad too. Now, nobody enjoys the process of misfortune itself, but as Christians, we have an advantage. We can see the light at the end of the tunnel, and it's NOT a train! Look at what James says about this in James 1:2-4. We are to find joy even in that which is not inherently joyful, and that's because of the results. God does not just inflict disaster willy-nilly on His people. The fact that we suffer sometimes is not at odds with His love. Remember, friends, God's purpose for us is not to bring us to earthly happiness. His purpose for us is to bring us to eternal happiness with Him in heaven, and sometimes the road to heaven is a little bumpy.
- B. However, those bumps and those bruises are sometimes what God uses to equip us to be the people He wants us to be. Just look at Scripture. From Abraham to Zechariah, not all of God's men of faith have always had clear skies and smooth sailing. Instead, they underwent trials in their lives too, just like we do, and sometimes more. Anybody want to trade lives with the apostle Paul? However, no matter how rough the sea gets—in Paul's case, literally gets—God always brings His people to safe harbor. That's why we should stay the course.
- C. Paul also directs in this text that Christians should be **CONTINUING STEADFASTLY IN PRAYER**. This is one that we really need to pay attention to, because too often, we don't give prayer the respect or the time that it deserves. Too often, we think of prayer as a right-before-bedtime thing instead of a constantly-throughout-the-day thing. By contrast, let's look at the attitude of the apostles toward prayer in Acts 6:2-4. Imagine, friends, if there were a work day at some congregation that had elders, and the elders didn't show up. Someone calls them, and they say, "Well, we'd ordinarily have come to the work day, but our time is so taken up with prayer that we really can't make it out there." In most of the congregations that I've been associated with, that wouldn't have gone over too well, but that's almost exactly what we see the apostles saying here. Now, I don't think it's that the apostles were lazy slackers. I think it's that they spent not seconds, not minutes, but hours in prayer every day, and they couldn't take themselves away from that critical work of prayer to do anything else, no matter how worthwhile. By contrast, I know Christians today who go for weeks or months without praying outside of the assembly. Brethren, we need to get back in touch with the power of prayer. We need to exploit this priceless advantage to the fullest, and we need to be steadfast in it.
- D. Next, Paul encourages us to be diligent in **DISTRIBUTING TO THE NEEDS OF THE SAINTS**. This refers to the willingness of the Christian to assist both the church and its members with his financial resources. For our models in this area, we need to take the Christians of the first century who are commended by Paul. Consider his comments in 2 Corinthians 8:1-3. As we consider this and similar passages, we need to recognize that Paul's focus is not on the amount of the gift, but on the giving heart. We don't see Paul bragging about all of the cash that the churches of Macedonia came up with. Indeed, as he says here, these were poor people who didn't have much to give, and in all likelihood, they didn't give very much. What Paul remarks upon, though, is the spirit with which they gave. They did so willingly, and they gave as much as they could or more. Let's remember that as we think about giving. Our giving, too, is not about the amount on the check. It's about our desire to please God, help His people, and contribute to His work. Let's be diligent in that.
- E. Finally, Paul states that we should be **GIVEN TO HOSPITALITY**. Sometimes, there's a terrible temptation to let our generosity stay inside the church-building doors, but that's not the way we should be. Now, as we've noted before, we're not nearly as likely as the first-century Christians to have some stranger show up at our doors seeking a place to stay, but we still must be diligent in opening our homes and our hearts, especially to the Lord's people. Consider, for instance, the judgment scene that Jesus describes in Matthew 25, where He depicts Himself commending the righteous for feeding Him, clothing Him, and so forth. We see the rest of the dialogue in Matthew 25:37-40. When we help other Christians, it's the same thing as helping Christ Himself.

Conclusion. If we have not been diligent in our service to God, now is the time to begin.