

DISCIPLINE FOR GODLINESS

WHY THE DISCIPLINES?

First, in today's world and Church, disciplined Christian lives are the exception, not the rule. This goes for men, women, *and* the professional clergy. We cannot excuse ourselves by saying this has always been the case. It has not! As to why this is so, several common-sense reasons could be tendered, such as poor teaching or individual sloth. But underlying much of the conscious rejection of spiritual discipline is the fear of legalism. For many, spiritual discipline means putting oneself back under the Law with a series of Draconian rules which no one can live up to — and which spawn frustration and spiritual death.

But nothing could be farther from the truth if you understand what discipline and legalism are. The difference is one of *motivation*: **legalism** is self-centered; **discipline** is **God-centered**. The legalistic heart says, “I will do this thing to gain merit with God.” The disciplined heart says, “I will do this thing because I love God and want to please Him.” There is an infinite difference between the motivation of legalism and discipline! Paul knew this implicitly and fought the legalists bare-knuckled all the way across Asia Minor, never giving an inch. And now he shouts to us, “**Train [discipline] yourself to be godly!**” **If we confuse legalism and discipline, we do so to our soul's peril.**

The second reason for this teaching is that men are so much less spiritually inclined and spiritually disciplined than women. A recent study conducted in the United Methodist Church reveals that 85 percent of the subscribers to that denomination's premier devotional booklet, *The Upper Room*, are women. Moreover, the same statistics hold true for their other devotional booklet, *Alive Now*, which has a 75 percent female readership.¹ This is corroborated by the fact that the overwhelming majority of books purchased in Christian bookstores are bought by women.² Women simply read more Christian literature!

It is also true that far more women are concerned about the spiritual welfare of their mates than vice versa. (That is a sad statement!) The magazine *Today's Christian Woman* has found that articles focusing on the spiritual development of husbands have garnered the highest readership.³ All this is sustained by hard statistics. A Gallup Poll conducted in June 1990 revealed that 71 percent of the women surveyed believed religion can answer today's problems, while only 55 percent of the men agreed.⁴ The typical church service has 59 percent females versus 41 percent male attenders.⁵ Furthermore, married women who attend church without their husbands outnumber by four to one the men attending without their wives.⁶

Bible Study: Discipline for Godliness

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Why? Certainly the pervasive American male credo of self-sufficiency and individualism contributes. Some of this may also be due to the male avoidance of anything relational (which, of course, Christianity is!). But we do not concede that women are simply more spiritual by nature. The parade of great saints (male and female) down through the centuries, as well as spiritually exemplary men in some of our churches today, clearly refutes this idea. But the fact remains that men today need far more help in building spiritual discipline than women.

Men, what I am going to say in this teaching comes straight from the heart and my long study of God's Word — man to man. In writing this I have imagined my own grandson sitting across the table, coffee cups in hand, as I try to impart to him what I think about the essential disciplines of godliness. This teaching is eminently user-friendly. The Church in America needs real men, and we are the men!

1. Personal correspondence made public with Harold Smith, executive editor of *Marriage Partnership* magazine, February 1, 1991.
2. **Bill Hendricks** of the Christian Booksellers Association reported on February 28, 1991 that a recent survey taken in seven Christian bookstores in different parts of the country revealed that of those customers buying Christian literature three out of four buyers are women, the average age is thirty-five years, and 70 percent of customers are married. The survey also indicated that just under half of the total customers (married and unmarried) have children at home, the average income is \$32,000 per household, the amount spent per visit averages \$15, and 60 percent of the customers attend church more than once a week.
3. *Ibid.*
4. **Gallup Poll, *Emerging Trends*, a publication of Princeton Religion Research Center.**
5. *Leadership*, Winter 1991, Vol. 12, No. 1, p. 17.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 18.