

Discipline & Legalism

(appropriate for High Schoolers and older)

Michael R. Daily, January 2020

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(Portions taken from material by the Rev. John S. Mahon)

What would you say about someone who took a knife, stuck it into a small child's stomach, and cut off part of the child's body? What kind of person would do such a thing? What if I told you the person who did this was a sadistic criminal who enjoyed torturing people? What would you think of this person?

What if, instead, I told you the person who did this was a surgeon who was removing an infected appendix? How would that change your view of the pain this person was inflicting on the child? What is it that makes the two situations different?

Although the surgeon inflicted pain on the child, the motivation was to enable the child to have a successful future. The surgeon did what he did because he cared about what was best for that child's future. It all depends on the motivation (and skill) of the person with the knife. Discipline and legalism can be thought of in a similar way.

There is a trend in the Church today in America to confuse discipline (good in God's eyes) and legalism (bad). There is also a trend to confuse grace (good) with license (bad). This study will look to the Bible and to some definitions to help clarify the differences between discipline and legalism.

What is legalism? Some say it is being too extreme in adhering to God's commands. So, in other words, there is something wrong with following God's commands as completely as possible?

Revelation 3:19

Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.

Jesus is talking to the church at Laodicea, the lukewarm church. He tells them that because He loves them He will not allow them to continue being lukewarm but will discipline them (inflict pain on them) to get their attention. And Jesus expects them to respond by doing two things.

- 1) Repent – change their mind and start doing things God's way
- 2) Be zealous – the word zealous means: *intense eagerness in pursuit of something.*

So, the antidote to being a lukewarm, disobedient Christian is to be intense in our pursuit of God and His kingdom! Extreme obedience is not legalism, it is zealousness, which God says is good.

Some say legalism is following the letter of God's commands instead of the spirit of His commands. In other words there is some weakness in the commands of God that we must protect ourselves from. Is that true?

Psalms 19:7-10

The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. ⁸ The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. ⁹ The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether. ¹⁰ They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.

No. God's commands are perfect, sure, right, pure, clean, true, righteous, and more valuable than gold! There is nothing about them that we have to protect ourselves from. In fact we need to be careful to follow them as completely as possible.

Psalms 50:16-17

But to the wicked God says, "What right have you to tell of My statutes And to take My covenant in your mouth? ¹⁷ "For you hate discipline, And you cast My words behind you.

Biblical Definition of Legalism Compared to Discipline

Legalism: *replacing the commandments of God with the traditions or rules of men*

Discipline: *training that corrects, molds, or perfects the mental or physical faculties or moral character with the end result being self-control in the trainee.*

From the outside legalism can appear or look similar to discipline for those who are not familiar with what the Bible actually says. From a Biblical perspective legalism occurs when the moral code of God is set aside and replaced with the rules or traditions of men. It is characterized by rules or traditions that do not help people obey God but instead get in the way of helping people obey Him.

Matthew 15:1-9

Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, 2“**Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders?** For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.” 3 And He answered and said to them, “**Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?** 4 For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and, ‘He who speaks evil of father or mother is to be put to death.’ 5 But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, “Whatever I have that would help you has been given to God,” 6 he is not to honor his father or his mother.’ **And by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. 7 You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you: 8 ‘This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far away from Me. 9 ‘But in vain do they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’”**

The other characteristic of legalism is that the motivation of the imposer is not to train the other person so that the person can reap benefits from the training, but that some other agenda is fulfilled.

Mark 7:8-9

Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.” 9 He was also saying to them, “You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition.

When someone accuses you of being legalistic they are saying that you are setting yourself up over God and your motivation is to impose your rules on other people as a replacement for God’s commands.

Colossians 2:20-23

If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as,²¹ **“Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!”**²² **(which all refer to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men?**²³ **These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.**

Legalism, unlike discipline, has no value.

Discipline

Discipline and punishment are often thought of as the same thing but they are not. Discipline is training for the benefit of the person. Punishment is the exacting of revenge at the expense of the other person. When the government puts someone in prison the purpose is to make the person pay for their crime, it is the exacting of revenge. But if we put a disobedient child in the corner for a short time, it may feel like prison to them, but its purpose is to help them learn self-control. This is not punishment but is discipline. Unlike legalism, discipline is something that God considers a good thing. And like a surgeon with a knife, discipline may be painful at the time but it results in a better future for the person.

Hebrews 12:11

All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

Discipline is training with the intent of helping someone be able to obey God more fully in the habits of their life. Notice that, at the time, discipline is not fun and can seem burdensome and tedious – the benefits come later.

Why is discipline needed?

Proverbs 29:19

A slave will not be instructed by words alone; For though he understands, there will be no response.

Discipline is needed because instruction with words alone rarely results in obedient action. Why? Because most of what people actually do is a result of habits they have practiced for a long time.

So, we need something more than head knowledge to help us grow in the Christian life. That's where discipline comes in. The discipline we are talking about is associated with training. The Greek word used in the Bible that is translated "training" is:

Gymnazō: *to train in gymnastic discipline; to exercise in anything, to train-to-use.*

How good a gymnast can you become if you read books on gymnastics, attend classroom instruction on gymnastics, watch videos about gymnastics, and listen to talks given by successful gymnasts, but you never actually go into the gym?

You would not be a gymnast! You would become someone who understands and appreciates gymnastics, but you yourself would never actually become a gymnast.

To become a gymnast you would also need to go into the gym regularly and put your head knowledge into practice. When you first do that what will happen? You will find out that its harder than it looks and that you are not very good at actually doing gymnastics. Then you will either quit or you will dedicate yourself to hours of training, practicing things over and over. You will slowly get better until eventually you are doing seemingly impossible things.

My daughter was a gymnast and before she reached high school age she was routinely doing backflips on a 4 inch wide beam of wood elevated 4 feet off the ground. She did this during competitions with large numbers of people watching her while some cheered for other events that were going on at the same time. But to be able to do that she had had to practice, train, and exercise the maneuver for many hours with only the encouragement of her coach and the other gymnasts.

You can do this practicing by yourself but its easier if others are doing it along side with you. Its even better if you have an experienced coach working with you. And how much practice does it take? Here's the rule:

"Amateurs practice till they get it right; professionals practice till they can't get it wrong." - Anonymous

Its one thing to hear sermons about witnessing, or watch videos about witnessing, or read books about witnessing. But its something very different to spend hours memorizing the Bridge Illustration and presenting it in real time to another person. This is why from mid-school through high school you have 6 years in which each year you can work on your Bridge Illustration and present it each year to someone. This is *gymnazō*. If you take it seriously, by the time you graduate from high school you will be able to effectively share the gospel with anyone who speaks English, anywhere in the world, for the rest of your life!

Luke 9:23

And He was saying to them all, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me.

In order to follow Christ we are going to have to deny our flesh each day and do things we don't feel like doing.

Discipline results in the ability to do things that you want to do but that the flesh does not want to do (i.e. self-control). And self-control is a fruit of the Spirit.

(Galatians 5:22-23)

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

(II Timothy 1:7)

For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline.

What is the relationship between grace and discipline?

I Corinthians 15:10

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.

Do we live the Christian life by grace or by discipline? Both. God has set it up to be a partnership between us and Him. We are to labor as hard as we can and God will give us the grace we need to accomplish His will.

For a detailed study on Grace please see, "Grace for Living – It Might Not Be What You Think It Is" at: <http://gciweb.org/2011/04/youth-bible-study-materials-michael-r-daily/>

This is a statement a woman made to our church one day. Determine if this statement is true or not:

"After becoming a Christian I got involved in a group that told me that to grow as a Christian I should read the Bible on a regular basis regardless of how I felt about it at any given time. But now I realize that was just legalism. God loves me just as much whether I read the Bible or not. Now I'm free from that legalism and I feel closer to God."

Is this really legalism? Were God's commands replaced with men's traditions? No. Was the motivation something other than the person's spiritual benefit? No. So, this is actually not legalism, it is discipline.

There are numerous verses where God tells us the regular reading and studying of His Word is expected. Here is just one:

Joshua 1:8

This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success.

How can you meditate on God's Word day and night without reading it regularly? Its not possible.

What about this statement? *"As Christians we must celebrate the birth of Christ on December 25th".*

Does this replace a command of God with a tradition of men? Yes it does. December 25th is a tradition of men and the Bible does not tell us the date Jesus was born. In addition, Romans 14 gives a command on this topic.

Romans 14:5-7

One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.⁶ **He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God.**⁷ **For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself;**

So, the statement, *"As Christians we must celebrate the birth of Christ on December 25th"* is one of legalism. Its fun legalism, but its legalism. What God is saying is, *"You can have special days if you wish or you can choose to not have special days, its not important to Me. Now let's get back to what is important to me (vs 7). I want you to live for Me and I want you to die for Me"*. We can celebrate the birth of Christ on any day or we can choose not to celebrate it and still be in God's will.

I Corinthians 9:24-27

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but *only* one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. ²⁵ Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then *do it* to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ²⁶ Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; ²⁷ but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.

There is a special eternal reward that God will give Christians who have lived a life characterized by faithfulness in the disciplines of the Christian faith. The name of this reward is the Imperishable Wreath which is one of the five crowns God gives as rewards. For a detailed study on Eternal Rewards please see, "Eternal Rewards – Compilation" at: <http://gciweb.org/2011/04/youth-bible-study-materials-michael-r-daily/>

I Timothy 4:7-10

But have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women. On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; ⁸ for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and *also* for the *life to come.* ⁹ It is a trustworthy statement deserving full acceptance. ¹⁰ For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers.

Discipline applied to study and application of the Word of God results in godly character and profit both in this life and in the next.

Download the SD version of this video: <https://vimeo.com/97024621> Edit it to the Karate Kid clips within the 8:13 to 11:28 and 15:18 to 18:34 range. Insert a slide with Hebrews 12:11 on it between the two clips and a slide with I Timothy 4:7-8 on it at the end of the two clips.

Video set up: Daniel LaRusso is a high school boy who is getting beat up on a regular basis by a gang of blackbelt karate students. They have agreed to leave him alone until the karate tournament, two months away – then they will really beat him up at the tournament. Daniel has two months to learn enough karate so that he can survive the tournament without getting seriously hurt. The first part of the video shows the discipline, the second part shows the fruit of the discipline. Watch the 6:30 minute video clip from The Karate Kid movie.

While Daniel was sanding the floor, painting the fence, painting the house, and washing and waxing the cars he was experiencing discipline. What was it like? It was hard, tedious work. He was alone. No one was cheering him on. He was making progress but it seemed so slow and irrelevant to the goal (learning karate) that he could not even see the connection. Discipline for the purposes of godliness have many of these same characteristics.

What are some ways we can discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness?

- 1) Read a chapter of the Bible regularly, strive for everyday. This is the most important single discipline we can exercise in the Christian life (we will see why in a minute). If you read a chapter of the Bible striving to do so everyday, asking God to teach you something from each chapter, it will take about 15 minutes a day. Over the course of a year you will have spent 90 hours being taught by God from the Bible. After 5 years you will have spent 450 hours learning something from God from every chapter of the Bible! Your progress will be imperceptibly slow at first, but it will be real and will accelerate as time goes on. When you read a chapter of the Bible every day what is it going to feel like? Its going to feel like, "sand the floor", its going to feel like, "paint the fence" but if you stick with it there will be a large payoff later.
- 2) Do in-depth self study of the Bible. Why is this important? It turns out that if you study the whole mind of God on any topic it will almost never all fit into a 30 minute sermon. If you can't do in-depth self-study of the Bible but can only listen to other people's 30 minute sermons, you are doomed to never fully understanding the mind of God on any topic. You will just keep hearing the same 30 minute sermon over and over again from other people. But here's the problem. You can't do in-depth self-study unless you have been doing #1! God calls to your mind what you have been learning in #1 to guide your word and verse searches when doing in-depth self-study. **Psalm 50:16-17, Hebrews 5:12-14**

- 3) Pray in a disciplined way. Disciplined prayer is based on what the Bible says God's will is. But in order to know in detail what is and what's not God's will you have to do #1. If you are not doing #1 then you can't pray in a disciplined way. Instead our prayers sound like we are asking for fulfillment of our fleshly desires.
- 4) Memorize scripture. This sharpens our understanding of the meaning of verses and protects us from blurring the meaning that God put in the words of the verses.
- 5) Practice the Gospel presentation (ex: Bridge Illustration) and be ready to share it. When memorizing and practicing the Bridge Illustration some of you practice until you get it right. But there is another option. You can practice it until you can't get it wrong, even when there are many distractions in the environment around you (professional or amateur - you decide). For a detailed study on this topic please see, "Good Works, Witnessing, & Evangelism" at: <http://gciweb.org/2011/04/youth-bible-study-materials-michael-r-daily/>
- 6) Find others willing to do these things with you and encourage you in them (Biblical fellowship)

Remember: Discipline is about doing, not knowing.

(I Corinthians 8:1)

Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.

Appendix – Other Passages Related to Discipline

Hebrews 5:12-14

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. ¹³ For everyone who partakes *only* of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.

Colossians 2:5

For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ.

II Timothy 3:16-17

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

II Corinthians 10:5

We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ,

Proverbs 6:23-24

For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching is light; And reproofs for discipline are the way of life ²⁴ To keep you from the evil woman, From the smooth tongue of the adulteress.

Proverbs 12:1

Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, But he who hates reproof is stupid.

Proverbs 19:20

Listen to counsel and accept discipline, That you may be wise the rest of your days.

Proverbs 13:18

Poverty and shame *will come* to him who neglects discipline, But he who regards reproof will be honored.

QUIET TIMES ALONE WITH GOD

JEREMIAH 15:16

THEME: *Discipline & Legalism*

PASSAGE FOR MEDITATION: *Matthew 15:1-9*

How does this passage relate to the theme?

When I reflect on this passage, does it primarily convict, encourage or challenge me? Explain why:

How will I apply this passage to my life in the coming week and is there anything I can do today to make this passage a part of my Christian life?

PASSAGE FOR MEDITATION: *Mark 7:8-9, Colossians 2:20-23*

How does this passage relate to the theme?

When I reflect on this passage, does it primarily convict, encourage or challenge me? Explain why:

How will I apply this passage to my life in the coming week and is there anything I can do today to make this passage a part of my Christian life?

PASSAGE FOR MEDITATION: *Hebrews 12:11, Revelation 3:19, Psalm 19:7-10*

How does this passage relate to the theme?

When I reflect on this passage, does it primarily convict, encourage or challenge me? Explain why:

How will I apply this passage to my life in the coming week and is there anything I can do today to make this passage a part of my Christian life?

QUIET TIMES ALONE WITH GOD

JEREMIAH 15:16

THEME: *Discipline & Legalism*

PASSAGE FOR MEDITATION: *Proverbs 29:19, Luke 9:23, I Corinthians 8:1*

How does this passage relate to the theme?

When I reflect on this passage, does it primarily convict, encourage or challenge me? Explain why:

How will I apply this passage to my life in the coming week and is there anything I can do today to make this passage a part of my Christian life?

PASSAGE FOR MEDITATION: *Psalms 50:16-17*

How does this passage relate to the theme?

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How will I apply this passage to my life in the coming week and is there anything I can do today to make this passage a part of my Christian life?

PASSAGE FOR MEDITATION: *Galatians 5:22-23, II Timothy 1:7*

How does this passage relate to the theme?

When I reflect on this passage, does it primarily convict, encourage or challenge me? Explain why:

How will I apply this passage to my life in the coming week and is there anything I can do today to make this passage a part of my Christian life?

QUIET TIMES ALONE WITH GOD

JEREMIAH 15:16

THEME: *Discipline & Legalism*

PASSAGE FOR MEDITATION: *I Corinthians 15:10*

How does this passage relate to the theme?

When I reflect on this passage, does it primarily convict, encourage or challenge me? Explain why:

How will I apply this passage to my life in the coming week and is there anything I can do today to make this passage a part of my Christian life?

PASSAGE FOR MEDITATION: *Joshua 1:8*

How does this passage relate to the theme?

When I reflect on this passage, does it primarily convict, encourage or challenge me? Explain why:

How will I apply this passage to my life in the coming week and is there anything I can do today to make this passage a part of my Christian life?

PASSAGE FOR MEDITATION: *I Corinthians 9:24-27*

How does this passage relate to the theme?

When I reflect on this passage, does it primarily convict, encourage or challenge me? Explain why:

How will I apply this passage to my life in the coming week and is there anything I can do today to make this passage a part of my Christian life?

QUIET TIMES ALONE WITH GOD

JEREMIAH 15:16

THEME: *Discipline & Legalism*

PASSAGE FOR MEDITATION: *I Timothy 4:7-10*

How does this passage relate to the theme?

When I reflect on this passage, does it primarily convict, encourage or challenge me? Explain why:

How will I apply this passage to my life in the coming week and is there anything I can do today to make this passage a part of my Christian life?

PASSAGE FOR MEDITATION: *Hebrews 5:12-14*

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When I reflect on this passage, does it primarily convict, encourage or challenge me? Explain why:

How will I apply this passage to my life in the coming week and is there anything I can do today to make this passage a part of my Christian life?

PASSAGE FOR MEDITATION: *Colossians 2:5*

How does this passage relate to the theme?

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QUIET TIMES ALONE WITH GOD

JEREMIAH 15:16

THEME: *Discipline & Legalism*

PASSAGE FOR MEDITATION: *II Timothy 3:16-17*

How does this passage relate to the theme?

When I reflect on this passage, does it primarily convict, encourage or challenge me? Explain why:

How will I apply this passage to my life in the coming week and is there anything I can do today to make this passage a part of my Christian life?

PASSAGE FOR MEDITATION: *II Corinthians 10:5*

How does this passage relate to the theme?

When I reflect on this passage, does it primarily convict, encourage or challenge me? Explain why:

How will I apply this passage to my life in the coming week and is there anything I can do today to make this passage a part of my Christian life?

PASSAGE FOR MEDITATION: *Proverbs 6:23-24*

How does this passage relate to the theme?

When I reflect on this passage, does it primarily convict, encourage or challenge me? Explain why:

How will I apply this passage to my life in the coming week and is there anything I can do today to make this passage a part of my Christian life?

QUIET TIMES ALONE WITH GOD

JEREMIAH 15:16

THEME: *Discipline & Legalism*

PASSAGE FOR MEDITATION: *Proverbs 12:1, Proverbs 19:20*

How does this passage relate to the theme?

When I reflect on this passage, does it primarily convict, encourage or challenge me? Explain why:

How will I apply this passage to my life in the coming week and is there anything I can do today to make this passage a part of my Christian life?

PASSAGE FOR MEDITATION: *Proverbs 13:18*

How does this passage relate to the theme?

When I reflect on this passage, does it primarily convict, encourage or challenge me? Explain why:

How will I apply this passage to my life in the coming week and is there anything I can do today to make this passage a part of my Christian life?

PASSAGE FOR MEDITATION: *Romans 14:5-7*

How does this passage relate to the theme?

When I reflect on this passage, does it primarily convict, encourage or challenge me? Explain why:

How will I apply this passage to my life in the coming week and is there anything I can do today to make this passage a part of my Christian life?