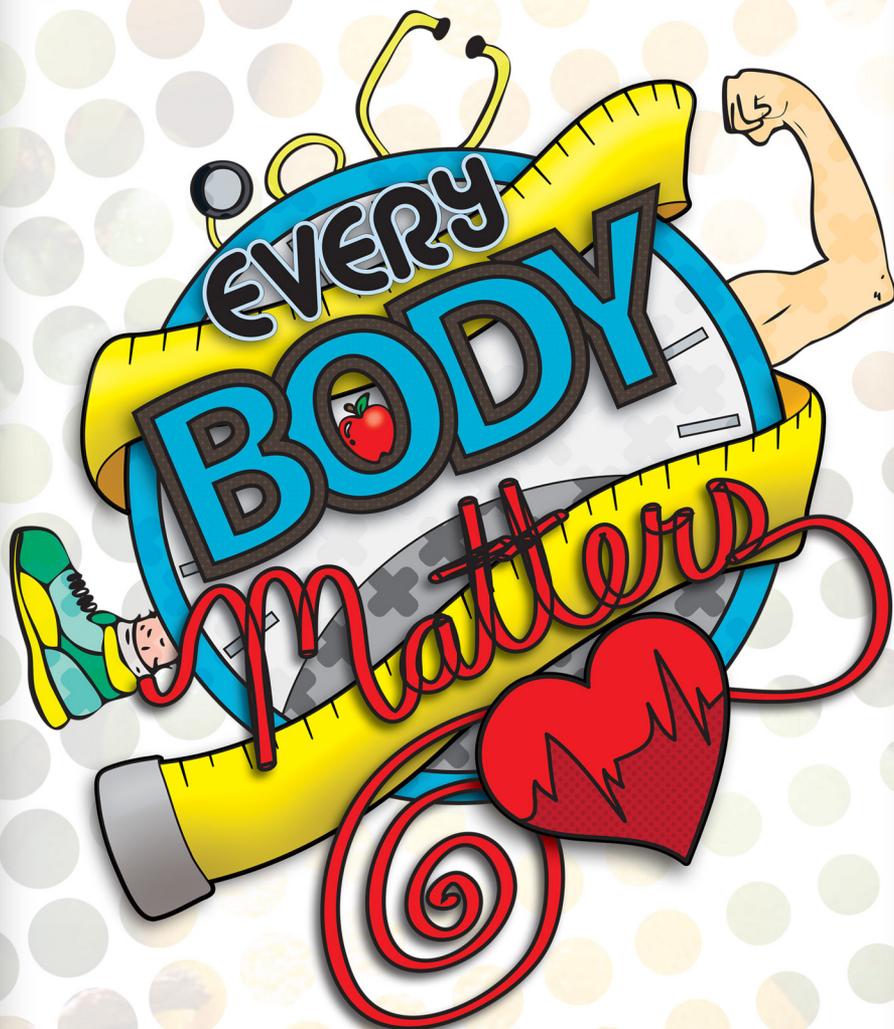


GOING DEEPER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

January 24, 2016



Discussion Guide

Health and Holiness

Connecting:

45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- In what ways did God move in your life this week? In what ways did you respond to him?
- What was your biggest challenge this week? In what ways, if any, did you invite God into this challenge?
- How honest have you been with us? (Graciously thank group members for their honesty if they state they have held back.)

Getting Started:

10 minutes

- Are you a person for whom self-control is easy or difficult? Could you explain?

Diving Into the Text:

60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Use the notes to explain the background of self-control.
- Read 1 Corinthians 9.24-27 aloud. Pause. Read the text once more. Seek to imagine yourself hearing the text for the first time.
- According to Paul, what role does self-control play on the journey of faith? Seek to discover as many answers in the text as possible.
- Do believers today place the same amount of emphasis on self-control as does Paul? Could you elaborate?
- Many Christians within the Evangelical tradition reject the idea of self-control as a necessary part of the spiritual journey because it seems to be a works-based approach to salvation. However, the exercise of self-control is firmly rooted in the reception of grace (Titus 2.11-12) and an expression of the formation of God's character within the believer (Galatians 5.22-23). As such, the practice of self-control yields important benefits for the believer on the journey of

faith. Read 2 Timothy 2.20-21 aloud, hearing Paul's words through the lens of self-control.

- What spiritual benefits result from the exercise of self-control?
- Why, if at all, might self-control be personally difficult for you to exercise? Could you elaborate?
- What role might self-control play in aligning your body's rhythms with those rhythms given by God? What might this look like in practical terms?
- Consider discussing the re-alignment of your body's rhythms and how you might support one another on this leg of the spiritual journey. Close in prayer, offering your bodies to God, submitting completely to his reign.

Context and Background

Self-Control

Self-control is the ability to control one's emotions, behaviors, and desires in the face of external and internal pressures to act in ways contrary to one's well-being. The practice of self-control is strongly resisted in our modern culture by Christians who equate it with a form of legalism and by non-Christians who state it is an unnecessary limit on the inherent freedom of the individual. However, the practice of self-control is one of the most important aspects of the Christian journey, without which growth in the character of Christ would not be possible.

Self-control is one of the most often mentioned virtues of those who follow Christ, stated both explicitly (Titus 1.8; 2.2; 1 Corinthians 9.24-27) and implied as a necessary quality involved in the process of sanctification (Colossians 3.7-10; Ephesians 4.20-24; Romans 12.1-2). While a necessary component for the journey of becoming like Christ, self-control is not something people inherently possess and must practice, but it is itself a gift of grace, a quality of God himself (Titus 2.11-12; Galatians 5.22-23). Because self-control is a gift of grace, the teaching that people are responsible for their own sanctification through their effort (Pelagianism) is not tenable. However, one cannot avoid the Scriptural exhortations for believers to participate in the transformation process (Ephesians 4.20-24; Philippians 2.12-13), a participation which requires personal effort and intention, both which are rooted in self-control. Modern theologians have attempted to wrestle with this seeming contradiction between self-control as a gift of grace and the exhortations of

believers to “work out” their own salvation. Typically, these wrestlings take the form of something called semi-Pelagianism in which some effort is required by people with God making up what is not found in the person. However, even this interpretation does not fit with Jesus’ own statement that apart from him his followers can do nothing (John 15.5).

How our effort and God’s grace work together are something which lie in the realm of mystery. One might postulate that our effort is required with the ability to act itself a gift of God, but this can be little more than a logical assumption. What matters most is that those who follow Christ must intentionally exercise control over their bodies, emotions, and passions, and that such work is of inestimable eternal worth (1 Corinthians 9.27) as it leads to holiness and usefulness in God’s Kingdom and Kingdom work (2 Timothy 2.20-21).

The Text

1 Corinthians 9.24-27: *Benefit of self-control*

Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians is an attempt to unify a splintered congregation. Many of the issues dividing the congregation have their root in a faulty theology of the body which emphasized the spiritual and denigrated the physical, leading the Corinthians to use their bodies as they saw fit (1 Corinthians 6.12-13, 19-20; 10.23-24. 31). Paul’s argument concerning the Corinthian’s understanding of the body comes to the fore in chapters 6-10. Paul’s argument relies heavily upon the virtue of self-control, the practice of controlling one’s body, emotions, and passions for the purpose of taking up the life of Christ, bodily. The issue of self-control would most likely strike the Corinthians as an unacceptable limitation of the freedom they believed they had in Christ. In chapter 9, Paul uses his own life as an illustration of how the exercise of self-control was itself an exercise of freedom, and how the exercise of freedom in this manner yields eternal benefits and urges the Corinthians to follow his example (1 Corinthians 11.1).

Paul transitions from a description of how he uses his freedom to exercise self-control to how the Corinthians might use self-control in their own setting by discussing the general benefits of self-control. In his discussion, Paul utilizes a metaphor drawn from the realm of sport, probably relying on the strong Greek tradition of physical games. While Paul may have the Olympic games in the back of his mind, more than likely, he is thinking of the Isthmian games, a series of Panhellenic contests held near Corinth during the years before and after the Olympic games. Paul notes that, in such contests,

only one person could win. With this in mind, the Corinthians should run (the journey of faith) as if they were the winners. Paul is not saying that only a single person could be successful on the journey of faith, but rather, he is encouraging the Corinthians to run like the winner of a race; that is, they were to “run” the journey of faith with all their might. However, running to win was not something that just happened. Athletes needed an extended period of training which equipped and enabled them to run successfully. The Olympics required a ten-month period of training for athletes, without which athletes were not qualified to compete (Plato, leg. 840a). In the same way, Paul notes that it is impossible to journey spiritually apart from intentional and extended training and practice. Such practice and training is worth the effort because, unlike the Isthmian athletes who competed for a crown made of celery, believers were seeking a lasting reward. Therefore, training for the journey of faith was not pointless, but what did such training look like? To this point, Paul has argued using sporting metaphors that intentional effort and training is required for the journey of faith, but he has not identified what such training is. According to Paul, it is the very thing the Corinthians lack, self-control. The training Paul undergoes is the process of mastering his body (self-control). Paul intentionally uses his freedom to work with his body because apart from such work he might be disqualified. What Paul means here is a matter of great debate. Does Paul mean to say that the failure to master one’s body disqualifies one from going further on the journey of faith; that is, is Paul teaching that one might miss one’s eternal reward altogether? We cannot be for certain, but what is clear is that the mastery of one’s body is of the utmost importance for the journey of faith.

2 Timothy 2.20-21: *The benefit of self-control*

2 Timothy is one of Paul’s Pastoral Epistles, letters written to encourage and exhort Timothy and Titus in their execution of their role as shepherds of the churches in Crete and Ephesus. In these letters, Paul deals at length with leadership structures and practices beneficial for these two ministers of the gospel. In 2 Timothy, Paul instructs Timothy how he might deal with false teachers who arise in a congregation. Paul notes that in any house there are two kinds of vessels, those who are made of precious metal and those who are made of worthless materials like clay and wood. Basically, Paul seems to use the metaphor to say that in a Church, there are “good” and “bad” believers. The latter engage in practices which are not proper while the former do not. Churches that cleanse themselves of the “bad” find themselves holy (purified) and ready to do the work God has for them.

On the surface, Paul's words are an exhortation to a form of Church discipline, urging the believers to "rid" themselves of those who teach falsehoods. However, the discipline which the Church as a whole is to engage in might be applied to the individual. In every person, there exist good and bad practices. The person who rids himself of the latter finds he is made holy and prepared to do the work God has for him. This application is not far from the teaching of Jesus (Matthew 5.29-30) and Paul in his other letters (Ephesians 4.20-24). Implied in this "discipline" is the presence of self-control, effort put forth intentionally to cleanse oneself. Thus, self-control becomes a necessary part of the path to holiness (sanctification) and availability for Kingdom service.

Real life with Blake:

On the journey of faith, our bodies matter, our response to the gospel leading to an ever-increasing yielding to the reign of God over our entire person, including our body. However, it doesn't take long to recognize that yielding to the reign of God involves a change of direction and practice, in our bodies. I experience this personally. God has physical rhythms which he created me to follow, rhythms like rest, good work, feasting, fasting, worship, and more. However, much of the time, I find my body is out of rhythm. I work too much and sleep too little. I eat more than I need and don't worship as much as I need. My body is out of whack. Getting my body in line isn't as simple as it sounds. It takes effort, a lot of it. I have ingrained habits, ways of being and thinking. Bodily, I am headed in a direction which must change, but that change is hard, painful, and fraught with a constant struggle not to fall back into old ways. As I engage in this struggle, I often wonder what it is all worth? Why try? It all seems like a bunch of hard work, and salvation is by grace, right? In my weaker moments, I want to give up, but God invites me to remember that my work itself is somehow grace, a transforming work of his grace. Somehow the mastery of my body, the bringing of my body into his intended rhythms, is part of his work in me and through me, a work which will have everlasting benefits. Right now, it is hard. Right now, it is contrary to culture. Right now I struggle and struggle, but in the end, for eternity, it is worth it. Somehow this struggle demonstrates God is in me and that I am becoming like him. Somehow, my going to bed not only honors God but makes me more like him. Saying "no" to having cherry pie every night is not just taking care of my body but transforming me to one who represents Christ in the world. With this in mind, it all becomes worth it.

Real life with you:

On the journey of faith, our bodies matter. When we respond to the gospel, we begin a journey of experiencing the reign of God in an ever-increasing way, a reign which includes our bodies. To allow God to reign in our bodies involves the exchange of culturally-defined physical rhythms for God-given ones. However, as we can all attest, this doesn't just happen. We don't just wake up one day and say, "I think I will live by God's rhythms for my body." Often, we get up and discover just how deeply ingrained the culturally-defined rhythms are in our person. Rooting them out takes an incredible amount of effort and intention. Keeping them out requires even more. Simply put, dropping old ways of being and picking up new ones takes something called self-control, a mastery of our person. It is here that we raise an eyebrow and wonder just what it is all worth. The exercise of such intention and effort seems to smack of works not grace, and yet somehow in God's economy the work of self-control is nothing short of the experience of God's grace (Titus 2.11-12), a grace which yields the eternal benefit of the formation of God's character within us (Galatians 5.22-23; 2 Timothy 2.20-21). This week, consider paying attention to your body. What are the rhythms by which you live? How are you eating? How much are you sleeping? What are you putting into your body? How are you using your body? You might use a journal to keep track of your thoughts and observations. At the end of the week, look over your observations and hold them before God, asking him to show you rhythms or practices which are different from those by which he intends you to live. Consider opening yourself to hearing his invitation to address these rhythms by putting them off and taking up new ones. Seek to understand this as an invitation to experience his grace working in you. Devise a workable strategy for putting off your old rhythm and picking up the new one. Seek out community for support. Should you fail, ask for forgiveness and begin again, recognizing the deep work of grace at work in you.



SENIOR
PASTOR
BLAKE
SHIPP