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## **TRAIN YOURSELF TO BE GODLY**

Revd Alan Hogarth

*There are a great many professors now that have nothing to distinguish them from the worst of men, but their praying, reading, hearing of sermons, baptism, church-fellowship, and breaking of bread. Separate them but from these, and every where else they are as black as others, even in their whole life and conversation.*

These words were written by John Bunyan, the puritan writer and preacher in the 17th Century (*A Holy Life: The Beauty of Christianity*). They could just as easily have come from the pen of a present observer of Christianity as we approach the 21st century. The Church today needs to recognise and teach the need for godly living, not as an optional extra to the Christian life but as a necessity. The Apostle Paul wrote: "It is God's will that you should be sanctified" (1 Thess 4: 3) and "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." (Phil 2: 12).

As part of a reformed Church we rightly differentiate between justification and sanctification, (see Articles 11 and 12), but whilst many professing Christians are happy to believe that they are justified on the merits of Christ alone, the whole idea of sanctification and holiness is less welcome. When the issue of godliness is addressed it is usually more about quick fixes and mystical experiences than what the biblical writers taught. Paul warned Timothy: "Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly." 1 Tim 4: 7. Exactly what Paul had in mind is uncertain, but even today myths and tales abound when it comes to being godly. For example, the idea that holiness is about surrendering oneself to God and allowing Him to do his thing - let go and let God - still finds its way into evangelical literature and sermons. Inevitably those who try such paths to godliness become disillusioned.

The Bible constantly urges us to be holy, to live lives that please God and to turn away from wickedness, but we are never told that there is an easy way to achieve this. On the contrary the Scriptures set before us a struggle, the need for self discipline and spiritual warfare.

In an age when everything is instant, we expect transformations to happen quickly but there is no such thing as instant godliness. The apostle wrote, 'Train yourself to be godly'. He exhorted Timothy to be disciplined in order to attain godliness. Many commentators point out that the word Paul uses here is the word from which we get 'gymnastic' or 'gymnasium.' Every important Greek city would have had such a place where athletes trained to compete in the sports and games at public festivals. It was not a place of quick fixes - no anabolic steroids and performance enhancing drugs - but one of hard work. On another occasion Paul used the athlete as his model for Christian living:

"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last for ever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a

man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.” 1 Cor 9: 24-27.

The idea is simple enough. In the same way that an athlete trains in order to become fit for the race he enters, so we need to exercise the same self discipline. The athletes who compete in the Olympic Games will have followed a strict training routine and denied themselves many things, and they do it for the glory of the moment. We too are commanded to be strict with ourselves and to deny ourselves, but we do it for an eternal prize. Our Lord proclaimed that self denial was an integral part of being his follower and being unashamed on the day of judgement. He called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said:

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.” Mark 8: 34-38.

The bible is clear about the issue of denying ourselves, saying ‘no’ to those things that are shameful and it is also clear about taking up new ways in order to demonstrate what God’s will is and how good it is: “Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.” (Rom 12: 9-13).

Paul also exhorted the Church at Rome to respond to God’s mercy and grace by offering themselves as ‘living sacrifices’ to God. This is not seen in some mystical or passive way; rather it is eminently practical. It requires loving, honouring and helping God’s people. It demands serving the Lord, praying and being zealous for the cause of the Gospel.

So how do we as Christians keep our spiritual fervour? Do we look for quick fixes or mystical experiences? Or do we grasp what the Bible teaches, working and praying hard, disciplining ourselves and training ourselves in righteousness. Old habits die hard, new habits need to be cultivated. We need to be resolute in our desire to be obedient while we wait for the blessed hope - the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

*Alan Hogarth is Vicar of Beckington in Somerset.*