

# Leadership Qualities: Self-Discipline

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Mischa Elman, one of the greatest violinists of the twentieth century, was walking through the streets of New York City one afternoon when a tourist approached him. “Excuse me, sir,” the stranger began, “could you tell me how to get to Carnegie Hall?” Elman sighed deeply and replied, “Practice, practice, practice.”<sup>1</sup>

Gary Player, one of the most successful international golfers of all time, lost count of how many times someone said to him, “I’d give anything if I could hit a golf ball like you.” After one particularly grueling day on the links, Player couldn’t resist correcting the person, “No, you wouldn’t. You’d give anything to hit a golf ball like me, if it were easy.” Player then listed the things one would have to do in order to achieve his level of play: “You’ve got to get up at five o’clock in the morning, go out and hit a thousand golf balls, walk up to the club house to put a bandage on your hand where it started bleeding, then go and hit another thousand golf balls. That’s what it takes to hit a golf ball like me.”<sup>2</sup>

Another professional golfer, Chi Chi Rodriguez, put it this way. He said, “Preparation through steady practice is the only honest avenue to achieving your potential.” Octavia Butler, in an essay for aspiring writers, says, “First forget inspiration. Habit is more dependable. Habit will sustain you, whether you’re inspired or not.... Habit is persistence in practice.”<sup>3</sup>

Whether in the concert hall, the playing field or the classroom, the steadiness of practice is crucial for realized potential. It is an even more critical issue when it comes to living the spiritual life. We achieve great things by training ourselves. Through proper training, we form proper habits; we can intentionally choose those habits that are desirable for the formation of character. Habits and practice seem obvious, ordinary, pedestrian; there aren’t many books that deal with this positively. But without proper habits, we will never build forward momentum as we strain toward the goal of the high calling of Christ. This momentum is built through a steady obedience – as Eugene Peterson calls it, “a long obedience in the same direction.”<sup>4</sup>

Inspiration and talent will only carry you so far. The habits you form will sustain you. One fall, in the panhandle of Texas, the local high school football team was enduring a terribly embarrassing season. Week after week, the hometown would show up and cheer to no avail; it was abysmal. Finally, a wealthy oil man could take it no longer. The week before the homecoming game against their arch-rivals, he asked to address the team. “Boys,” he began, “when I wore the green and gold, we won nearly every single game. Now look at you. You’ve become a joke! You need some motivation. So here’s my proposition. You win this one game, and I will personally buy each of you a brand new pickup truck.”

Those student-athletes began to think and dream about how fine they would look driving around in their new trucks. They obsessed over which girls they would ride in them and whether or not they would get bumper stickers. They were so excited about the prospect of driving a truck with

that “new car” smell. They hung a big poster of a truck in the locker room. And they went out and lost the game 38-0.

Enthusiasm does not make up for preparation. Exuberance doesn't translate into a single point on the scoreboard. Seven days of hurrah and whoop-de-do will never compensate for lack of discipline, conditioning, practice, coaching, experience and character. Those are the things that will sustain you, whether it's in the locker room or the board room. We need more than passion. We need self-discipline.

In the book *Renovation of the Heart*, Dallas Willard uses the acronym V.I.M. to discuss the simplicity of discipleship.<sup>5</sup> Our passion can often reveal to us a **vision**. That vision will show us our **intention**. But we must devise a **means**, a strategy for accomplishing that vision. Vision, intention and means – these are the keys to accomplishment for any individual or organization. But means involves discipline.

### *The Discipline of Training*

The apostle Paul understood the importance of discipline. In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 he emphasizes that, as followers of Christ, our spiritual lives form the core of our character:

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 forever. 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.

The crown first-century athletes won was a laurel wreath. This is a wonderful illustration for the things of this world that we attempt to reach. A laurel wreath wilts in just a few hours. It would never be worn a second day. Likewise, the victories and plaudits of this world are short-lived. It's not long before the world wants to know, “What have you done for me lately?” As leaders with an increasingly eternal perspective, however, we know that our prize will not fade or wear out.

As we spend time in the disciplines of the spirit, Paul says we're to be like runners. During the course of a race, runners don't stagger from one lane to another. They rivet their attention on the finish line and run a disciplined race toward it. At the start of a marathon, all the runners are crowded together. But over the course of the race they spread out. And an interesting thing happens – fewer people finish than start. The race of life is not to be compared with a sprint. Let's not deceive ourselves. Life is a marathon. And in the marathon, it's not how you start, it's how you finish that matters most.

So also boxers train with purpose so they can absorb powerful blows without falling down. They build up their physical stamina so that their legs will hold out for the final rounds. How tragic to be ahead on the judges' scorecards but run out of gas in the end and collapse in defeat. Yet this

is how we often are. We have 200 meters of training for a 400-meter race. We have five good rounds in us, but the fight is scheduled for 12 rounds. We start so well only to end so poorly. Lack of adequate training may not show up at first, but enthusiasm and passion will eventually give way to fatigue.

Paul trained for his daily spiritual journey like a world-class athlete. Why? Because he wanted to have the self-control to finish the race without being disqualified. Godly leaders need to cultivate this same kind of spiritual fitness. Doing so can and will affect other areas of leadership life – how we treat others, where we go for answers to major decisions and the skills we use in accomplishing our daily tasks.

If you want to be an effective leader, identify the habits you need to build into your life so you can lead with diligence – habits such as physical fitness, balance between work and home, financial and personal accountability, proactivity in the workplace and the like. Strap on your shoes and get going. Disciplined habits will give you the momentum you need to not only move forward, but also to run your earthly race with strength and purpose.

## ***Power and Restraint***

History has repeatedly witnessed the combination of great power without moral restraint, and the results have always been disastrous. Our ability in the U.S.A. to develop increasingly powerful weapons and technology seems to be growing exponentially, but moral accountability and the development of character actually seems to be going in reverse. This is a volatile combination. We have a group of people growing up with more knowledge and technology available to them, but they've been led to believe that there are no absolute moral standards. Power without restraint is frightening.

The only reassurance we have is the knowledge that the ultimate power behind all things is also the supreme source of good who demonstrates patience and mercy toward humanity. Through the prophet Jeremiah, we see God's loving forbearance and restraint in action:

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message." So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.

Then the word of the Lord came to me: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the Lord. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended for it.

“Now therefore say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, ‘This is what the Lord says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions.’ But they will reply, ‘It’s no use. We will continue with our own plans; each of us will follow the stubbornness of his evil heart.’”

#### Jeremiah 18:1-12

This passage gives us keen insight into God’s dealings with his people. In spite of the spiritual and moral rebellion of his people, the Lord offered to avert the disaster of impending judgment if his people would only repent and return to him. In his eleventh-hour appeal, God told the people of Judah through his prophet Jeremiah that he could reshape the clay of their destiny. Instead of uprooting and destroying them, God wanted to build up and establish them, but he would not do so unless they repented of their evil and disobedience. “Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions” (v. 11). Sadly, the prophet could predict with certainty that the people of Judah would stubbornly turn down the Lord’s gracious offer.

The Lord is compassionate, gracious and slow to anger (Numbers 14:18; Psalm 103:8). His willingness to endure and to forgive our frequent acts of disobedience is nothing short of amazing. His patience is stunning. Peter says, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). His patience and forbearance are evident throughout the Scriptures and exemplify the essence of perfect self-discipline. He is the supreme example of moral restraint. If God is this way, and his ultimate goal for my life is that I become more like him, then this should become evident in the way I live.

### *The Source of Self-Discipline*

Composure, presence of mind, cool-headedness, patience, self-possession, restraint – only a few people display these qualities, and those who do usually make effective leaders. People who demonstrate the fruit of self-control are productive, dependable and influential. The apostle Paul demonstrated these qualities, and he wanted his coworker Timothy to demonstrate them as well. He advises his young associate: “God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline” (2 Timothy 1:7).

Because of Timothy’s natural inclination to timidity, Paul was prompted to encourage his fellow worker to maintain a holy boldness and assurance in his position of spiritual leadership. Paul had commissioned Timothy to oversee many of the churches in the Roman province of Asia, and this task required “a spirit of power, of love and self-discipline.” Self-discipline is needed to stretch us beyond our own comfort zones and areas of personal inertia. For some, the needed discipline will be more in the realm of the emotions; for others the focus of self-control will be in the realm of the mind or of the will.

Writing to the Galatians, Paul said that “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). Like the apostle Paul, we live in an undisciplined time. People seek freedom through excess, but they find only bondage. They seek pleasure through passion but find pain instead. Self-discipline, as a fruit of the Spirit, allows us to experience freedom and pleasure as we grow in our faith and walk in obedience.

While people without Christ can demonstrate self-control, this quality in its fullest expression of character transformation is a part of the spiritual fruit that only the Holy Spirit can produce in us. Jerry Vines writes:

There’s no way to gain control over self by one’s self. The Stoics taught a type of self-mastery. It was about a morbid suppression of the desires. They came to the point of worshiping their own self-will.... Christian legalism does the same thing. In Colossians 2 Paul mentions those who worship their own self-will. He points out in Colossians 2:23 how futile it is to try to live the Christian life by one’s own power of will. This is why Christian legalism really doesn’t work. It emphasizes what we do or what we fail to do instead of the power of the Holy Spirit, who can control our passions and desires.

Self-control is really about bringing our whole life under the Holy Spirit’s control. It is not the outward result of self-repression but rather the inward result of the Spirit’s work.<sup>6</sup>

Self-discipline is seldom easy. Paul’s words to Timothy revealed that this young man probably struggled with it in his ministry. And most leaders who come across the need for more self-discipline in their lives struggle at times as well. Many of us can relate to Shakespeare’s tragic character Hamlet in his difficulty determining a course of action. His lines from the famous “To be or not to be” speech resonate with us:

And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,  
And enterprises of great pith and moment  
With this regard their currents turn awry,  
And lose the name of action

*Hamlet, Act III, Scene I*

What the young Prince of Denmark is saying is that he waffles back and forth. He vacillates between two options and cannot take action. Such overly introspective inaction drains a person of power. We all come to challenges which require bold, decisive action. If we have not trained ourselves to do this, we will find ourselves lacking the momentum to accomplish it. God’s Spirit is the power source behind self-discipline. Timothy evidently found that out, and so can we.

## ***The Rewards of Self-Discipline***

Self-discipline may be defined simply as that quality that allows a person to do what needs to be done when he or she doesn't feel like doing it. Success in leadership often comes by simply doing what no one else is willing to do: toughing it out, risking an opinion, making a decision when everyone else is paralyzed by uncertainty. In many situations other people know what to *do*, but are too tired or afraid or apathetic to *act*. That's when someone who is equally tired and equally afraid steps forward and does what's needed. This person has that elusive quality called self-discipline. And whether from a formal or informal position in the organization, that person provides leadership.

From that basic understanding of self-discipline we look at an example of a woman who exhibited great self-discipline in her own life, and reaped the rewards of her efforts – the “wife of noble character” described in Proverbs 31:10-31. She may be a literal woman, or she may be Wisdom personified. Either way, she teaches some important things about self-discipline and leadership. As you read through the following list, think about how you can integrate some of her character traits into your own life as a leader.

A person who disciplines his or her character is one who:

- Is noble and greatly valued (v. 10).
- Gets the job done regardless of what it takes, and has the full confidence of others (v. 11).
- Works hard enough to make a profit (vv. 11-15).
- Delays gratification and pleasure to invest his or her profits and then tirelessly works his or her investments for maximum return (vv. 16-19).
- Generously participates in the larger community by sharing his or her profits with the needy (v. 20).
- Has no fear of the future (vv. 21-27).
- Is honored, respected, admired, praised and rewarded (vv. 28-31).

## ***Self-Disciplined Relationships***

The need for self-discipline applies in a leader's personal life as well as in the workplace. Scripture tells us, “A righteous man is cautious in friendship, but the way of the wicked leads them astray” (Proverbs 12:26). Henry Cloud and John Townsend offer some specific advice regarding how this can be done in their book *Boundaries*:

Sarah heaved a long sigh. She'd been working on major boundary issues in her therapy and was seeing real progress in resolving responsibility conflicts with her parents, husband, and kids. Yet today she introduced a new issue.

“I haven't told you about this relationship before, though I guess I should have. I have tremendous boundary problems with this woman. She eats too much, and has an

attacking tongue. She's undependable – lets me down all the time. And she's spent money of mine and hasn't paid me back in years."

"Why haven't you mentioned her before?" I asked.

"Because she's me," Sarah replied.<sup>7</sup>

That story illustrates the need we all have to place boundaries around our lives. We need to form borders that will protect us and enable us to develop. Yet identifying, erecting and living within those boundaries requires personal understanding and self-discipline, especially when those boundaries have to do with changing our own behavior.

Solomon warned about the danger of not exercising self-discipline as we examine our close association with others. He spoke about the "righteous man" who is cautious in friendship. The man to whom Solomon referred was intentional about choosing his friendships with care, then continued to examine the nature of those friendships. He tells us, for example, "A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother" (Proverbs 18:24). Then he warns us, "Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man, do not associate with one easily angered, or you may learn his ways and get yourself ensnared" (Proverbs 22:24). Solomon knew the harm that could come to a person who chose not to closely examine the personal effects of a negative, destructive, or even "wicked" friendship.

Our associations are influencing factors in shaping our character, particularly in our youth. Very often, in our youthful naiveté, we find ourselves desperate to be accepted by the popular crowd. Without discernment, this can lead us to activities we would never have imagined being engaged in on our own, but as part of a group it becomes acceptable behavior. Having an overabundance of loose acquaintances without the depth of a quality friendship can be a dangerous thing.

It would be nice to think that all this clears up along with our complexion as we enter adulthood. But that's not the case. Many of us can think of toxic relationships that are still present long into our middle years. Perhaps there is someone in your life who is so perceptive and clever that you have been unaware of the effects of his razor tongue. You enjoy your time with him, but his humor always comes at someone else's expense. That's a toxic relationship. We all enjoy putting others down; it makes us feel better about ourselves. But this is not only detrimental, it is diametrically opposed to our spiritual growth as believers in Christ.

This kind of self-discipline is challenging because it involves evaluating relationships with other people – some of which are extremely difficult to manage – recognizing their destructive attributes, and then acting to change the nature of the relationship or to cut it off. Doing so requires a great deal of personal self-evaluation and self-discipline, because more often than not a good deal of the relationship dynamic – for good or for ill – has to do with *us*.

There are two extremes to be avoided: One is total independence, and the other is co-dependence. The balance is interdependence, and I can move toward this as I become more aware of the true source of my security. If my sense of worth is tied to self and selfish desires, I will move toward the extreme of independence. I will run from community at the first sign of difficulty and shut others out. If my sense of worth is tied to other people, I will move toward

the extreme of co-dependence. I will avoid all conflict, even when I need to confront people. However, if my foundation for security and worth is deeper than that, I can stand in the tension of interdependence.

Those who hold leadership positions find themselves in need of establishing boundaries on a daily basis. The constant demands placed on leaders force them to analyze and then prioritize their time and energies. Self-discipline is a character trait that helps leaders evaluate what they're doing, stop doing what's harmful, and start doing what's constructive.

This process is not always pleasant. It is far easier to drift in and out of relationships haphazardly, without putting this much thought and effort into them. But the Bible is clear when it warns, "Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character'" (1 Corinthians 15:33). We can choose to believe the Bible and do the hard things it requires, or we can choose to live foolishly and suffer the consequences. It comes down to a question of faith and will. Are we willing to live as if the Bible is true in spite of whatever feelings we may have to the contrary? What would it look like if we lived as if we believed 2 Timothy 1:7 was a divinely inspired message to us from God? How would that affect our business appointments? How would that affect time spent with family? How would that affect the jokes we tell on the golf course? How would that affect how much we eat, drink, sleep, watch television or exercise?

So much of what we do is rooted in fear. We're afraid of rejection, so we put up a façade or we compromise our ethics. We're afraid of being weak, so we put on a false bravado. We do and say things we know aren't part of who we are or who we are called to be – all because we're so desperate for the approval and affirmation of others. We fail to grasp the fact that if God accepts and affirms us, we have the greatest source of security imaginable.

But if we chose to live as if 2 Timothy 1:7 is true, in spite of our feelings, we would do things differently. We would view people differently. We would work differently. We would spend our time differently. We would probably sleep differently. Imagine knowing that God has given us a spirit of power, love and self-discipline. He gave that to us. We don't have to earn it. We don't have to be afraid. We don't have to view people with suspicion. We don't have to be slaves to our own appetites. We can live in freedom. Self-discipline allows us to live in freedom.

### ***Self-Discipline and Spirit-Dependence***

Many people think self-discipline is simply a matter of trying harder. Yet the Bible speaks of self-discipline as a fruit of the Spirit. Plants don't produce more fruit by trying harder. Transformation is the work of God done with our cooperation. God supplies the power, but there is a direct correlation between the amount of transformation taking place and the types of activities a follower of Christ engages in. John Ortberg uses an illustration that may help us understand this better:

Consider the difference between piloting a motorboat or a sailboat. We can run a motorboat all by ourselves. We can fill the tank and start the engine. We are in control. But a sailboat is a different story. We can hoist the sails and steer the rudder,

but we are utterly dependent on the wind. The wind does the work. If the wind doesn't blow – and sometimes it doesn't – we sit still in the water no matter how frantic we act. Our task is to do whatever enables us to catch the wind.<sup>8</sup>

This is how spiritual transformation works. Discipline and dependence go hand in hand. We can pursue it, but we can take no credit for it.

It feels awkward to engage in something in which we have so little control. It's difficult to let go of the results of our activities. This is the life of faith, and it grows as we walk in humble obedience. How willing are we to live as if the Bible is true, even when our feelings run contrary to what Scripture would have us do?

Perhaps that's the wrong question to begin with. A better starting point may be a line from the Spice Girls: "Tell me what you want, what you really, really want." What do we really want out of life? That's the first question. The next question is, "What will that cost?" Finally, we come to the most pertinent question of all, "Are we willing to pay the price in order to get what we say we really, really want?" These questions must be asked from time to time, because we don't want to come to the end of life and find that we've just lived in the heat of the moment with no real intentionality. We want to be people who have a genuine sense of calling and purpose. Let us pray that we have the grace to run with endurance the race that's set before us.

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<sup>1</sup> Source unknown.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from James Emery White, *You Can Experience...a Spiritual Life*. Nashville: Word Publishing, 1999, p. 201.

<sup>3</sup> Octavia Butler, *Bloodchild: And Other Stories*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 1996, p. 138.

<sup>4</sup> Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. Downers Grove, IL: 1980.

<sup>5</sup> Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002, 85.

<sup>6</sup> Jerry Vines, *SpiritFruit*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001, pp. 131-132.

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend, *Boundaries*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992, p. 208.

<sup>8</sup> John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997, pp. 55-56.