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Faith Fitness

1 Timothy 4:7-8

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Each summer, professional baseball and football hold their Hall of Fame induction ceremonies. This year on July 29<sup>th</sup>, Cal Ripken Jr. and Tony Gwynn will be inducted into baseball's Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. Tony Gwynn, won eight batting titles, and Cal Ripken Jr., played in a record 2,632 consecutive games. (Ripken received 98.5% of the vote, Gwynn 97.6%). On Saturday August 4<sup>th</sup> Gene Hickerson, Michael Irvin, Bruce Matthews, Charlie Sanders, Thurman Thomas, and Roger Wehrli will be enshrined in football's Hall of Fame ceremonies at Fawcett Stadium in Canton, Ohio. These men are part of two elite fraternities of professional athletes whose physical ability, disciplined training, and skill enabled them to accomplish incredible feats of strength, speed and coordination that made them worthy to receive the highest honor in their sport.

Yet to see them in their highlight films at the peak of their playing days and then to see what they look like today, we are reminded of how fleeting life is, how our bodies, even the best of them, age and change and nothing can stop the process. For most of us, old is something at least ten years older than we are. Jill kindly pointed out to me that Byron and Adam, the two Cape League players staying with us this were both born after I graduated from college. I had another of those moments last week when I saw the cover of US News and World Report and one of the articles highlighted was "Fitness for the 50-plus set" - that seemed a long ways off until I realized seven years from this month I enter that set! It doesn't seem possible.

Physical fitness is something that we all need to pay attention to – God created us with physical bodies that need proper nutrition, rest, exercise, and care. As important as physical training is, Paul writes in 1 Timothy that there is another kind of training that is even more important, even more vital, to our well being. 1 Timothy 4:7-8 says, "***Train yourself in godliness, for while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.***"

Physical training is of some value – it helps us get the most out of our body, it increases our strength, flexibility, and endurance and helps us fight off illness, disease, recover faster from injuries, and the endorphins produced by exercise benefit our attitude and sense of self-confidence. When we are engaged in regular physical training – whether walking, running, swimming, biking, lifting, doing yoga, playing a sport -

whatever it is it often makes us feel better about ourselves. When we haven't been doing physical training on a regular basis – then it can be a little discouraging and challenging when we start up again and we need to be patient with ourselves as we get going and set small goals that will enable us to mark our progress. The good news is if we stick with it for the long haul we will see improvement. Physical training is of some value.

At the airport for a trip, a woman settled down to wait for the boarding announcement at Gate 35. She writes, "Then I heard the voice on the public address system saying, *"We apologize for the inconvenience, but Delta Flight 570 will board from Gate 41."* So my family picked up our luggage and carried it over to Gate 41. Not ten minutes later the public address voice told us that Flight 570 would in fact be boarding from Gate 35. So, again, we gathered our carry-on luggage and returned to the original gate. Just as we were settling down, the public address voice spoke again: *"Thank you for participating in Delta's physical fitness program."* Physical training is of some value for getting our heart rate up and our waist size down, but *"godliness is valuable in every way."*

One of the interesting things I learned studying this scripture from 1 Timothy is that the Greek word translated as "Train," is *Gumnazo* – that means "exercise." It is the root from which we get our word "gymnasium." It is also used in several other places in the New Testament in ways that show we can be trained; we can exercise ourselves, either in godliness or in sin. Like 1 Timothy 4, 2 Peter 2:14-15a is also a warning about the influence of false teachers, *"They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts **trained** in greed. Accursed children! They have left the straight road and gone astray."*

In Hebrews 5:14 the author laments the spiritual immaturity of people who should know better who haven't trained or exercised themselves in godliness, *"You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant is unskilled in the word of righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been **trained by practice** to distinguish good from evil."* Physical and spiritual training involves effort, often strenuous effort.

Jesus as always is our example as we are reminded in Hebrews 12:1-4:  
*"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and **let us run with perseverance the race** that is set before us, <sup>2</sup> **looking to Jesus** the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its*

*shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. <sup>4</sup>In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.”*

Hebrews 12:11, *“Discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been **trained** by it. Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet.”*

Finally Titus 2:11-12, *“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, **training us** to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright and godly.”*

People train themselves to do all kinds of things, many of which have nothing to do with godliness. This past week ESPN showed the Nathan’s Hot Dog eating championship that was won by American Joey Chestnut who defeated the six time champion from Japan, Tokeru Kabayashi, by eating 66 hot dogs and buns in 12 minutes a staggering average of a one every 10.9 seconds. While it takes training to accomplish such a feat, it hardly seems the best use of one’s body. I can’t imagine what your cholesterol level goes to after eating 66 hot dogs in 12 minutes. I also noticed in the TV Guide that last night there was a one hour program devoted to the Rock Paper Scissors National Championship. Are these sorts of endeavors truly worthy of training and devoting oneself to?

**The Bible says train yourself in godliness because godliness is valuable in every way both in the present life and the life to come.** This week I have communicated in conversation and writing with folks who are dealing with physical crises, family and relational issues, disappointments, grief, loneliness, addiction, accidents, the challenges brought on by aging – all of these things can be met better and dealt with more successfully when we are training ourselves in godliness.

A new book *The Art of Aging: A Doctor’s Prescription for Well Being*, by Dr. Sherwin Nuland makes the point that if we want to live well and age well, we must participate actively in our own lives. His prescription for Aging includes four different kinds of exercise.

**Exercise your mind** – keep your mind active by reading frequently – the newspaper, the Bible, good works of literature, do crossword puzzles, visit museums, sign up for a class.

**Exercise your body** – Work out at home, join a gym, walking, swimming, running, dancing – get yourself moving.

**Exercise your compassion** – As we grow older, Nuland believes one of the good things is we may become more compassionate. Share with others how much you care about them. Demonstrate that you are interested in what other people have to say.

**Stay connected** – social networks like those we develop by being active in church really contribute to the quality of our lives. Staying active in church and in our communities helps keep us connected to one another. You mean more to those who love you than you may realize.

One of the realities of life is that our body weakens as we age but our spirit can and should grow stronger. One of the reasons why so many of us find it hard to do physical exercise is a matter of time or a matter of choices and self-discipline, and some of us are limited by what our body can do. The great thing about training ourselves in godliness is that while there are some fundamental things that do take time – like reading the Bible, praying, serving others – much of our training can be done and should be done while we are simply living life.

For example, when I was at the grocery store this week, which was packed with people, I made a game with myself that I was going to try and improve the attitude of the people around me. So as I was standing in line at the deli counter getting a few items, there was a woman lamenting how long things were taking and I said to her, *“Isn’t it great to live somewhere that so many people want to be?”* She replied that she lived in Connecticut and just spent the summer on the Cape. I proceeded to ask her questions and learned that her husband died 14 years ago and we talked about a number of things that made the time pass and before you knew it she was being served. When she placed her order she didn’t speak up very loudly and the young woman from Eastern Europe asked her to repeat her order. The woman did and then looked at me kind of exasperated and I said enthusiastically, *“Can you imagine going to Russia for the summer and working in a deli? I couldn’t do that for anything. I really admire the attitude of these young folks who come here to work.”* She said she couldn’t imagine doing that either. Then, she began to object to the young woman from Eastern Europe because she wanted roast beef at the price that was listed even though the store had put a different roast beef in that place that actually cost two dollars more. The young woman explained that was okay but the woman was getting a little worked up and missed that. I made eye contact with the deli worker and smiled at her. Then a friend of the CT woman

came by with her shopping cart. The deli worker handed the roast beef across the counter as the woman began complaining to her friend and saying she was leaving the store because she *“Had enough,”* and launched into her complaint about the roast beef. The young woman behind the counter called out to her, *“You got it at the posted price. It is on your sticker.”* I looked at her and smiled again and said, *“You’re doing fine, don’t worry about it.”* And she looked back at me and just rolled her eyes as if to say, *“What can you do?”*

What we can do is train ourselves, exercise ourselves in godliness. Every encounter we have with another human being, every experience of life, every joy and success, every sorrow and failure is an opportunity to train ourselves in godliness or a missed opportunity to do so. It all depends on how we look at things - we can be defensive and see something as a personal affront or attack and a chance to complain. We can see life through the lenses of self-pity. Or we can look at life through the eyes of faith and see everything that comes our way as an opportunity to train ourselves in godliness, to develop our spirit, to become more like Jesus which is what we are supposed to be doing.

When the famous New York Yankee outfielder Mickey Mantle was dying of diseases brought on by a life of heavy drinking, he said he would have taken better care of himself had he only known how long he was going to live. How should we take care of ourselves when the Bible teaches us we are never ceasing spiritual beings with an eternal destiny in God’s great universe?

**Perhaps we can adopt an exercise program for holiness. We can be training for reigning.** If we want to imitate Jesus, we can’t live like our old selves. We need to live like Jesus did. Athletes train until they can perform without thought. People who want to get in top physical shape often pay a personal trainer to guide and motivate them. Jesus is our personal trainer in spiritual training. Jesus show us that there are some spiritual exercises we can do through our own effort – (like prayer, study, worship) that make it possible to do things we could never do by our own effort (being like Jesus). So we need to be engaged in an exercise program for godliness.

An Exercise Program for godliness

1. **Study the Manual** – the practice of studying the scripture to get the ideas, thoughts, and images of scripture inside me. What training can you do with the Bible this week? Could you read for 15 minutes a day?

2. **Listen to the Coach** - the practice of Silence enables us to quiet the competing voices and noises so we can better listen to God's voice. Schedule one 15 minute period of silence this week (and sleeping doesn't count). This can even be done when you are driving in your car.
3. **Improving Your Serve** – practicing service and obedience so we learn we are not the center of the universe. Find a way to be a servant to at least one other person this week. For those of you whose life consists of lots of serving, see it also as a chance to grow in godliness.
4. **Play under control** – the discipline of Fasting. Fasting teaches us we do not have to be controlled by the appetites of our body and we can discover our deeper craving for God. Fast from at least one meal in the coming week and use the time talking with God about your appetite for the Spirit's presence in your life. Fast a little from technology if that is gaining too much of a hold on your time.
5. **Learn from every Match** – this is the discipline of Journaling. In journaling we learn to keep a record of our encounters with God – for the benefit of becoming more like Jesus. Start a notebook or journal and try writing briefly at the end of the day or the beginning about when you were aware of God's presence, of where you felt joy, or where you felt failure or weakness or temptation and what you feel and thought about what is happening.

For followers of Jesus, life is a contest in which the goal, the aim is godliness. In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Paul says, *“Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, **but we an imperishable one.** So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.”*

We know that all athletes do not exercise self-control in all things. Too many are in the news every week precisely because they are unable to exercise self-control when it comes to many areas of their lives and relationships. Paul's point, though is that athletes will sacrifice and discipline themselves through hard, punishing training in order to be able to win a medal, trophy, title or championship and with it fame and fortune.

Even more important than physical training, is spiritual training. Physical exercise is a very important component of healthy living. Growing in godliness is valuable not only in the present, but for eternity.

**Blessing**

“But as for you, people of God,  
pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.  
Fight the good fight of the faith;  
take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called.”

1 Timothy 6:11-12 (adapted)