

## **Whatever Happened to Self-Discipline?**

Daniel 1:1-5

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I received an email a couple of months ago from a young man that lives in Atlanta. He and his fiancée are getting married in April, and he was checking on my availability to help them with wedding vows. This man was a teenager when I was a pastor in Moultrie and he now lives in Athens.

It might surprise you how many times I get these phone calls from mothers of the bride-to-be or groom-to-be. She's so involved in the wedding planning that she's even securing my services.

I usually picture this mother as very loving, but a bit overly involved, unwilling to allow her son or daughter to struggle more with the details of planning his or her own wedding.

If we take too much of the struggle of life away from our children, it stunts their ability to become self-disciplined.

Hebrews 12:11 says, "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

Growing up, my mom cooked my food, washed and ironed my clothes, and put clean sheets on my bed. I never thought much about it at the time, about how much work and effort it took for her to do all that for the family while she worked a full-time job. I thought it was just something most moms do, and some dads, and I took what she did for granted.

The first two years of college I was only thirty miles from home, so I traveled home on the weekends. The first weekend I went home I took home a huge bag of dirty clothes and dropped them in front of the washing machine, fully expecting my mom to wash them, which she did.

However, before I went back to school that weekend, my dad told me not to bring another bag of dirty clothes home for my mother to wash.

From that day on, I had to develop a new kind of self-discipline and learn a new set of skills, which involved making sure I didn't run out of clean underwear and socks before wash day.

When we leave the nest, if we want a life that comes close to being successful, we must develop a life of self-discipline, and no self-discipline comes without struggle.

Self-Discipline is going to look different for every person, but it is important that we exercise self-discipline in at least three areas: mind, body, and spirit.

In the passage that was read this morning from the Book of Daniel, four young men are separated from their homeland. They are stripped of their names and identity and given new ones.

They are made to learn a new language, a new culture, and new customs. They had to leave their families behind and live a life of servitude to a foreign king.

The good news is that they were treated well and had plenty to eat. The bad news is that the food they were given to eat was forbidden by their Jewish religion.

Daniel and his friends lived under Levitical Jewish Law handed down to them by Moses and part of that law gave them strict dietary rules to follow. Following these laws was one of the ways they worshipped God, and it was one of the things that distinguished them from other religions.

So, to eat certain meat meant that you defiled yourself. If you were a Nazarite, which Daniel might have been, you took a vow not to drink any alcohol.

Following dietary laws required self-discipline, especially when you were hungry.

What if your religion said you couldn't have any beef, seafood, or chicken and you are starving, and these foods are set before you in abundance with an all you can eat, free of charge invitation? How many of us would have the self-discipline to say, "Please take it away and bring me some vegetables? God says I can only eat vegetables."

To us, it sounds strange, but to David and his three friends, what they ate connected them to God. This was a spiritual issue.

Whatever happened to self-discipline?

There is a lot of self-discipline today. Look at athletes, soldiers, health care professionals, teachers, coaches, business owners, and many parents.

While there is a lot of self-discipline to be found in many sectors, Daniel shows us that self-discipline should start with our faith.

If self-discipline is centered around our work, our bodies, our hobbies, or trying to please someone else, our self-discipline can actually lead us away from God and into a place where we will not find peace or happiness.

Daniel and his friends could have followed the self-discipline prescribed by the King, but that would have been contrary to their faith and it would have led them away from God.

Daniel and his friends lived under Levitical Law, which gave them rigorous demands on what they could and could not eat.

Daniel believed if he followed his faith, God would honor him and that self-discipline would have a trickle-down effect on other areas of his life.

We don't live under Levitical Law but under the Law of Grace, but Daniel's lesson is still a valuable one for us.

If our self-discipline begins with our faith, it will have a trickle-down effect on our lives as well, and we will have a better chance of living a successful, happy, joy-filled, life.

Note, I did not say that we would live a life free of struggle.

God does not ever take away all of our struggles. Just as a loving parent does not do that, God does not either.

God does equip us, through our spiritual disciplines, to overcome our struggles, to rise above them, and to be an example to others because of how we have overcome our adversities through our self-discipline.

Daniel and his friends were teenagers during this time in their lives. By the time, they completed their three years of training for the king's court, they may have been in their early twenties.

The earlier in life we learn the importance of going with God, of incorporating spiritual disciplines in our lives, the less pain and less struggle we will experience due to bad choices.

While the world will continue to throw challenges at us, God will continue to work on our behalf.

Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love the Lord and are called according to his purpose."

We see that as Daniel exercised self-discipline by honoring God with his diet, God gave him favor with the chief official in charge of him and his friends.

The chief official was sympathetic to Daniel's desire to maintain his religious diet but afraid if he relented and they ended up looking less than healthy, he could lose his job or his life.

So, Daniel struck up a deal with him. He asked the chief official to test them on their diet for ten days. If at the end of ten days, if they looked healthier to let them continue, and if they didn't look more vigorous, then they would stop it.

One of the most challenging things for a teenager and young adults to do is to honor and worship God with their bodies. When hormones are running wild, and we want to experiment with all kinds of things, it's difficult to trust a 2000-year-old faith that says things like this:

"Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Colossians 3:5).

"Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. 19 Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; 20 you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies" (1Cor 6:18-20).

"Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat." Proverbs 23:20

Of course, we are fooling ourselves if we think such passages are predominately for teenagers and young adults.

In case you haven't noticed, we all have a body until the day we die. As long as our body and our minds are connected, we will be tempted to use our bodies for unholy purposes.

Here in Daniel, we have a group of teenagers setting the example for all of us.

First, they make a stand for God. They are self-disciplined by placing principle ahead of the King's promise, and their lives are filled with the Spirit of God.

Secondly, they practiced what they believed was honoring to God with their bodies.

If we practice self-discipline and honor God with our bodies, we are worshipping God because the Bible teaches that our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. (1 Corinthians 6:19)

They believed what they put into their bodies made a difference to God. We should believe the same thing. If you don't believe it, talk to your doctor.

Our Jewish forefathers had strict dietary laws, which we don't have to abide by, but perhaps we should think more about the principle of what they lived by. There should be more self-discipline and more thought of God in our dietary and sexual practices.

If we want God to bless us with a healthy body, then we ought to be helping God out at the meal table with some self-discipline.

It takes a lot of self-discipline to practice anything. Saying we believe something is one thing. Practicing it is another.

For example:

I believe I should be generous.  
Practicing generosity is different.

I believe in forgiveness  
Practicing forgiveness is different.

I believe I should read the Bible.  
Practicing Bible reading is different.

Being self-disciplined about what we believe is carrying things to a different level.

I believe I should be self-disciplined.  
Practicing being self-disciplined is different.

Finally, these men were disciplined to honor God with their minds.

These young men were chosen in part because they showed an aptitude for learning. They were quick to understand. They were well informed. They were taught the language and the literature of the Babylonians. So, they had to study and prepare.

The text says that “To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.”

We should understand that all knowledge is relative. We never know what God will use that we have learned. Our minds are gifts from God. We should treasure knowledge and not be afraid to learn.

Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind." (Luke 10:27)

It takes great self-discipline to be committed to any field of learning. As we study, we should do so with an understanding that our knowledge is not an end to itself, but rather an avenue to the world where God may take us and use what we know to make His world a better place.

Sometimes, our journey takes us to places we didn't plan to go. Sometimes we are exiled by war, miscarriage, death, sickness, job loss, depression, addiction, divorce, lawsuits, family estrangements, broken relationships, and many other things.

Daniel reminds us that during these times we need to fall back on what we have learned. We need to summon the disciplines of our faith. We need to rely on God to use our knowledge to help others.

We need to remember to be disciplined, even when we are in a strange land. We need to have faith that if we honor God, God bless us. God will not forsake us, but God will not take away all the struggle. To live is to struggle.

God wants you to have self-discipline in your mind, body, and spirit.

Justin, as you leave us to become the Youth Pastor at First Baptist Dalton, we want to thank you for entering into the struggle with us. Thank you for being an example of a self-disciplined Christian.

You came from Mississippi where life changed when you were in middle school. One day a gunman entered the high school where your mother taught and took the life of one student and shot several others, including your brother. That day, your world was changed, and you realized more than ever that to live was to experience struggle.

Your journey took you to college at Southern Mississippi, I suppose because someone has to graduate from there and live a miserable life of rooting for their football team. It's a life-long struggle brother that requires a lot of self-discipline.

But there your journey lead you to meet a beautiful woman who shares your passion for ministry and your love for people, and it's a wonderful thing because this calling can be a very lonely road.

Your journey took you to a place called McAfee School of Theology where your mind grew as much as your heart, and you couldn't wait to test your knowledge and put it into practice.

You put that knowledge into practice here in Jefferson, Georgia, where your self-discipline grew, slowly at first, but it has become noticeable to all of us.

Your journey has been blessed by two beautiful daughters, who continuously demand your discipline as a parent and that will only increase as you show them Jesus by your actions and by your words.

We all have our own special memories of you. They will likely oscillate between the funny moments we have had with you and the times you have entered into life's struggles with us.

Now your journey leads to Dalton, Ga., where the roads are paved with carpet, but the people are no different from us.

They are people who need to be self-disciplined in their walk with God in mind, body, and spirit and they need a Daniel to show them what that looks like.

We do expect that once you get there that you will exhibit the same self-discipline that has been evident here.

To the Safley family, we pledge that we will not forget you. We love you and thank you for eight and a half years of ministry you have given to us.

We have a few gifts for you this morning which we will now share with you.

To our church family and especially our teenagers, while today is a day of sad goodbyes, please remember these words from Psalm 1:5

Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

To our teenagers, I encourage you to not abandon this church for another during the time we look for a replacement for Justin. God has someone in mind for you.

Now is the time for you to be like Daniel – to be faithful to God through the struggle and continue to grow in mind, body, and spirit.

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