

“Spiritual Exercises To Make You Strong”

1 Thessalonians 5:16-22

by

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Introduction

The human body is a remarkable creation of God (Psalm 139:13-15). It consists of more than 50 trillion cells and its weight is about 60% water. It manufactures 300 million new blood cells every day and it has a heart that beats 70-80 times per minute or 100,000 times every day and over 70 years, pumps 400 million liters of blood. The average adult breathes 6-7 liters per minute (picture in your mind the liter Coke bottle) which is about 10,000 liters per day and 3,650,000 liters per year. Other interesting facts include:

There are about 100 billion neurons (nerve cells) in the brain.
We are born with 12 billion neurons that do not regenerate when they die.
There are 100,000 miles of blood vessels in an adult – enough to circle the earth four times.
The average human eye blinks about 20,000 times every day.
The human kidney filters 1,700 liters of blood every 24 hours.
There is enough carbon in your body to fill 900 pencils.
There are about 75,000 hairs on your head (except for Ted Cabal).

Essential to the health and well being of this gift from God are 3 important factors: 1) rest, 2) diet, and 3) exercise. It is the last of these three that especially interest me:

exercise. A quick survey of any basic text on anatomy or even a visit to your local encyclopedia yields some amazing discoveries about exercise and fitness. Did you know that for your body to be healthy and fine-tuned it needs 1) strength fitness, 2) endurance fitness, 3) anaerobic fitness, 4) speed fitness, 5) orthostatic fitness, and even 6) relaxation fitness? All of these are crucial to a healthy, fit and productive body. “The human body, like any living organism, must be used or it will lose its structure and function”

(“Exercise and Physical Fitness” in *Encyclopedia Britannic*, 29). As the saying goes, “If you don’t use, you lose it.”

What is true about physical life is also true about spiritual life. Our inner person, our spiritual being requires attention and exercise if it is going to be healthy and productive. To be fit and ready for service, trained and fine-tuned for efficient ministry, we must engage in spiritual exercise. There are certain disciplines we must adopt as our very own.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:16-22 the apostle Paul directs our attention to 8 spiritual exercises that will make us strong for the Lord. In short yet powerful commands, we are challenged to live our lives in a very specific and intentional manner that will conform to the will of God (v. 18). Each of these 8 exercises is in the form of an imperative, a command. God is not asking us to consider these principles for possible adoption and implementation, rather it is his expressed expectation, His will, that these activities become a vital part of who we are.

It also is interesting to note that the verbs in each verse are in the present tense, calling for continuous action. Further, the verbs stand last in each command being preceded by an adverbial modifier. This adds strength to these modifiers as they receive an emphatic emphasis by their particular placement in the verse. Verses 16-18 give particular attention to the inner life of the believer, while verses 19-22 focus more on the life of the Church as it gathers for corporate worship (Hiebert, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 257). Inwardly and outwardly, individually and corporately, Paul provides us potent exercises to enable us to be spiritually strong for the Lord.

Exercise #1 Rejoice consistently. 5:16

“Continually rejoice always” is the first challenge we receive. Paul addresses the subject of joy over two dozen times in his letters. It is the dominant theme of Philippians where he tells us: “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say rejoice” (4:4). In 2 Corinthians 6:10 he teaches that there is no contradiction in rejoicing when we sorrow. Nehemiah 8:10 reminds us that “The joy of the Lord is your strength.” Joy is a mark of one who has experienced God’s transforming grace through Jesus Christ.

The word “always” is a favorite of Paul’s in this letter. He uses it 4 other times (1:2; 2:16; 3:6; 4:17). It means “on every occasion” or “in every set of circumstances.” Joy is not the same as happiness. Joy is not based on the situation in which we find ourselves. Some situations are bad, painful, they hurt. Joy is based, rather, on the fact that we are in Christ and what we are experiencing is the will of God for us (v. 18). We can experience joy even when we sorrow. On July 23-24, 1999 I participated in a men’s retreat at the beautiful Estes Park outside of Denver, Colorado. Much of our time was spent learning how to be better husbands and fathers. One gentleman, after our Saturday morning session, told me that his family had become even more special to him in recent years because he had lost a son to kidney disease a number of years earlier. The son was only 27. Tears welled up in his eyes as he talked, but a gentle smile also crossed his face as we reflected on the fact his son, who had trusted Christ as Savior and Lord, no longer experienced the pain and severe limitations his disease had brought. For him Philippians 1:21 especially rang true, “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” There was sorrow, but there was also joy.

Because we belong to Christ and He is working his purpose in and through us, we can possess genuine joy. We can be spiritually magnetic and infectious. We can bless rather than curse, encourage and not disappoint, give hope rather than despair.

In life and especially ministry, we must exercise our “joy muscles.” As they grow strong we develop an optimistic outlook, a sense of humor, a winsome spirit. There is a smile rather than a frown. People leave our presence more encouraged than when they first arrived.

The French philosopher/theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote, “Joy is the surest sign of the presence of God” (quoted in Chuck Swindoll’s, *Study Guide on 1 Thessalonians*, 66).

Exercise #2 Pray unceasingly. 5:17

There is an intimate connection between verse 16 and 17, for unceasing prayer will almost always produce a joyful heart. A heart full of joy is the result of a heart free of burdens, and a heart free of burdens is a heart comforted by prayer. John Calvin said, “. . .by prayer we disburden our anxieties, as it were, into his bosom. . .” (John Calvin, 2 *Thessalonians*., 296; cf. 1 Pet. 5:7).

It is unfortunate that this verse is prone to be misunderstood and thereby becomes a source of discouragement rather than encouragement. Some people read the verse and conclude that God somehow expects them to be in prayer 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Prayer by some miraculous means is to be a moment-by-moment and second-by-second occupation. Of course this is impossible, and it fails tragically to grasp both the spirit and intent of the text.

The verse challenges us to be constant and consistent in our prayer life. Prayer is to be a regular habit, a close companion. Prayer can be understood essentially as a “breathing exercise.” When we inhale, we listen to the voice of God in His Word illuminated by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. As we exhale, we speak back to the Lord sharing our heart, telling Him what is on our mind.

The word for *prayer* “is a general one that implies a worshipful approach to God” (D. Michael Martin, “1, 2 Thessalonians,” *New American Commentary*, 181). It encompasses all types of prayer. As we try and establish a good foundation in these basic exercises, I believe we should focus on two particular aspects of this exercise and in this order: praise and petition. We should regularly come into the presence of our Lord praising Him, honoring Him, adoring Him for who He is and all that He has done. We praise Him for His person and work. We acknowledge that He alone is God and that He alone is worthy to be praised. Then, we can approach Him who is Father asking for what we need and interceding on behalf of others.

No one has addressed the urgency of prayer with greater passion than Andrew Murray. In his classic *The Ministry of Intercession*, he reminds us,

“Christ actually meant prayer to be the great power by which His Church should do its work, the neglect of prayer is the great reason the Church has not greater power over the masses in Christian heathen countries” (p. 7).

“Let us take time to seriously consider this need. Each Christless soul will go down to utter darkness, perishing from hunger, even though there is bread to spare. Unknown millions of souls are dying without the knowledge of Christ. Christians all around us are living a sickly, feeble and fruitless spiritual life. Surely there is a need for prayer. Nothing but prayer to God for help will avail” (pp. 32-33).

Prayer is that incredible conversation which connects earth to heaven and man to God. I do not understand all of its mysteries and how it is that the prayers of finite

humans can move an infinite and sovereign God. Many believe a prayer revival is sweeping our land. Recently the \$5.5 million World Prayer Center was opened in Colorado Springs for the purpose of praying for world evangelization. Today there are public prayer marches, prayer walks, on-site prayer and what has been called, “saturation prayer.”

In November 1998 more than 3 million people participated in Campus Crusade’s Three Day Prayer and Fasting Conference. Some believe we can identify quantifiable results of prayer. In Washington, D.C., 237 churches have come together to pray and crime has reportedly dropped 17%. (*Charisma*, May 1999, pgs. 46-51).

I readily admit I am not sure what to make of all of this. What I do know is God says pray, and when I pray I become stronger spiritually. I am blessed and God is pleased. Prayer will be your hardest exercise I am convinced. Scripture teaches this and my own experience confirms it. Why? Perhaps it is because we fail to appreciate or understand the incredible privilege we have. Andrew Murray, I believe, got it right again when he wrote “Throughout Scripture, in the life of every saint, of God’s own Son, throughout the history of God’s Church, God is, first of all, a prayer hearing God” (p 11). If He is always listening, and He is, then we should always be praying.

Exercise #3 Give thanks comprehensively. 5:18

Here is perhaps one of the most difficult commands in the Bible to obey. The demand seems absurd. There must be a mistake. And yet, there it is: “in *everything* give thanks. . .” However, this is one place in Scripture where we dare not stop too quickly. We must take the verse in

all of its fullness. As Paul Harvey is fond to say, we must read “the rest of the story.” And just what do we discover? “This *is* the will of God *in* Christ Jesus for you.” Now the key is turned. Now the mist begins to lift. Now my sight begins to clear. Note we are to give thanks *in* all things not *for* all things. Say thank you that my mother died. Say thank you that my parents are getting a divorce. Say thank you for the terrible accident that left my brother in a coma with a battered and broken body. No! This is not what it says. It says, “Give thanks *in*. . .” Call to your aid that Romans 8:28 perspective. Leon Morris puts it well,

“. . .when a man comes to see that God in Christ has saved him, everything is altered. He now realizes that God’s purpose is being worked out. He sees the evidence in his own life and in the lives of those about him. This leads to the thought that the same loving purpose is being worked out even in those events which he is inclined not to welcome at all. When he comes to see God’s hand in all things he learns to give thanks for all things. Tribulation is unpleasant. Yet who in the midst of tribulation would not give thanks when he knows that the Father who loves him so greatly has permitted that tribulation only in order that His wise and merciful purpose might be worked out?” (Leon Morris, “1 & 2 Thessalonians,” *NICNT*, (173-174).

To this Calvin would add:

“For what is fitter or more suitable for pacifying us, than when we learn that God embraces us in Christ so tenderly, that he turns to our advantage and welfare everything that befalls us? . . .this is a special remedy for correcting our impatience--to turn away our eyes from beholding present evils that torment us, and to direct our views to a consideration of a different nature—how God stands affected toward us in Christ. (Calvin, *1 Thessalonians*, 297)

For a lost person to say “thank you” for everything is foolish. For the child of God to say “thank you” for everything is faith.

Exercise #4 Desire the Spirit fervently. 5:19

This verse better reads, “The Spirit do not quench.” The word quench means “to put out.” This is the only place in the N.T. where the word is used in this metaphorical manner. A believer cannot lose the Spirit (Eph. 1:13-14), but he can grieve Him (Eph. 4:30) and quench Him. In this verse it is the work, and not the person, of the Spirit which is in view. To quench the Spirit is to extinguish, stifle, restrain or stop. His work in our lives.

The Church since its beginning has struggled to “get it right” when it comes to the ministry of the Holy Spirit. A.T. Robertson lamented in his time, “Today there are two extremes about spiritual gifts (cold indifference or wild excess)” (*Word Pictures*, Vol. IV, 37). Warren Wiersbe warns us, “The fire of the Spirit must not go out on the altar of our hearts” (*Be Ready*, 118). The Spirit is a grace gift of God received at salvation. We are now His temple (1 Cor. 6:19-20). He is God, and being God He could reside anywhere He chooses. It is amazing to realize His desire is to live in us. James 4:5 teaches that “The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously.” In passionate response, we should long for Him, desiring His full and unhindered activity in our lives.

Exercise #5 Honor preaching properly. 5:20

One way we may quench the Spirit is by treating as nothing or despising the preaching of the word. “Do not hold in contempt these utterances” is how B.H. Carroll, first president of S.W.B.T.S. renders this verse. Apparently preaching was suffering in the first century what it is suffering as we approach the twenty-first century: a lack of respect. What was the problem we ask? False prophecies? Unimpressive preaching? This gift was not spectacular enough? It was too spectacular? We don’t know for sure.

What we do know is the preaching of the word is “The power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18), it convinces and it convicts (1 Cor. 14:24), it is that which comes “in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance” (1 Thess. 1:5). Calvin paints a realistic picture from his own day when he writes, “. . . Many feel disgusted with the very name of preaching, as there are so many foolish and ignorant persons that from the pulpit blab out their worthless contrivances”

(Calvin, *1 Thessalonians* , p. 300). However, he goes on to add: “But the Lord declares in this place by the mouth of Paul, that the course of doctrine ought not, by any faults of mankind, or by any rashness, or ignorance, or, in fine, by any abuse to be hindered from being always in a vigorous state in the Church” (Calvin, 301).

Preaching continues to be assaulted in our day. *USA Today* reported several years ago that when asked how he got his idea for his multi-billion dollar company EDS, Ross Perot replied, “I was daydreaming in church during a sermon.” Yes, preaching is under attack and sometimes it comes even within the evangelical camp. Exposition has especially been the target of many modern minister of the word who believe we must tell it the world’s way if we want the world to hear. Calvin Miller of the Beeson Divinity School is a major advocate and evangelist for the preference of narrative preaching as opposed to exposition. He says, “Since we are a story-soaked culture, to preach in any other way is just not going to attract people” (interview with *Net Fax*, 2-15-99; p. 1). *The Futurist* stated in June, 1996, “The most valued workers in the new century will be storytellers. Any professional – advertiser, teacher, politician, entrepreneur, athlete, or minister – will be valued for the ability to come up with stories that captivate an audience” (p. 9). Might I suggest a couple of principles to follow that will acknowledge

the element of truth in the narrative approach but will not embrace its error? First, remember: it is a sin to make the bible boring. Paige Patterson puts it right when he says, “The criticisms I hear about expository preaching are, in reality, criticisms about ‘boring preaching.’ The greatest preaching in the earth is still captivating, prophetic, invigorating, Christ-honoring exposition” (Quoted in Vines and Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit*, pre-preface). Secondly, when the Bible tells a story then you tell the story. When it teaches doctrine, then you teach doctrine. Do what you do with passion, zeal and energy. And, honor and be faithful always to follow Paul’s admonition to “Preach the word” (2 Tim. 4:2).

Exercise #6 Live life wisely. 5:21

We are not to despise preaching, prophecy, the proclamation of God’s word by His prophets. However, a question naturally arises: Does anything go? Are we to open the door with eyes wide shut exercising no discrimination whatsoever? B.H. Carroll reminds us, “There are some spirits that are from God. There is an inspiration that come not from God. There is devil inspiration” (B.H. Carroll, *English Bible*, 90). Calvin says, “Keep the middle path. . .examination or discrimination ought to precede rejection, so it must, also, precede the reception of true and sound doctrines. . .Sometimes good and pious teachers fail to hit the mark (Calvin, 300-01).

The word *test* means “prove, examine, put to the test.” The New English Bible says, “try to determine the genuineness.” And note the qualifying phrase: “All things.” Vigilance in guarding “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude) is an ever necessary posture. We can never relax our guard or let down our defenses. The

history of our own Southern Baptist denomination teaches us how quickly the truth can be lost.

Dr. Jerry Vines has written a fine book entitled *Spirit Works*. It examines the theology and practice of the modern charismatic movement in the light of Scripture. In that book, Dr. Vines provides a number of tests to discern the genuineness of certain spiritual activities. I would like to follow his lead and submit a four-fold test that can assist us in this crucial exercise of living wisely. It is not infallible, but I believe it to be extremely helpful.

1. The Saviour Test. (cf. 1 John 4:1-3) Does it properly honor and exalt the person and work of Jesus?
2. The Scripture Test. Is this teaching consistent with the whole Bible's instruction and doctrine in this area? Does this teaching attempt to take away or add to God's Word?
3. The Spirit Test. Is this teaching in concert with the expressed desires and ministry of the Holy Spirit as revealed in the Word? (Check especially against John 4-16).
4. The Saints Test. What have and what do other mature and godly students of Scripture say on this matter? (cf. 1 Cor. 14:31-33).

Exercise #7 Keep the good zealously. 5:21

This command is clearly related to what precedes it. Once we have put to the test all things, we are to continually hold fast what is good. "Hold fast" means to hold on, retain, keep, to take possession of. Paul is telling us to cling to and never let go of that

which is good. The immediate object of this exercise is prophetic utterances. Some believe it is legitimate to extend the principle to all spiritual gifts and activities. I believe, however, Paul placed no restriction on this command, and that verse 22 would indeed indicate he set this exercise forth as a general rule of life to be applied to all things. When you discover any good thing from God, guard it, keep it, don't let go of it.

However, the danger is not so much that you will let it go, as it is that you will let it slip away. In Song of Solomon 2:15 we are warned about the "little foxes" that can sneak into the vineyard and spoil the vines. Solomon is warning us about the little things that can wound our marriage, and all the while we don't even notice. The good things of a Christian marriage and family are not to be lightly or flippantly held. "Hold fast," hold tight, and never let go of those good things you have from God.

Exercise #8 Abstain from evil completely. 5:22

Abstain is a strong word. Paul used it in 4:3 when he told the Thessalonians to stay away from sexual immorality. Further, the force of the verb is strengthened by the fact Paul uses a preposition which emphasizes separation and he places it first in the text. Literally he writes, "From every form of evil abstain."

The word "form" is an interesting one. Hiebert points out while the term "can mean outward appearances, it can also mean, 'sort, kind, species.' This gives the best meaning here" (p. 266).

Evil does come at us in all sorts of sizes, shapes and forms. It is a complex enemy. While it never changes in its essence, it continually seeks new and enticing forms, tailor made just right for each one of us. Evil knows you from your shoe size to

your hat size. It regularly sizes you up that it might catch you off guard and knock you out. To withstand its perpetual assault and deception requires perpetual readiness and preparation.

What is an especially attraction form of evil to you may not be an attractive form of evil to me. Where I am weak, you may be strong. Where I am strong, you may be weak. However, we all have weaknesses, we all have areas of vulnerability. It is especially in those areas, perhaps it is the eyes, the mouth, the hands, the mind, the heart, or the will that you must daily avail yourself of the essential exercise to “abstain from evil completely.”

Edmund Burke said,

The instances are exceedingly rare of men immediately passing over a clearly marked line from virtue into declared vice and corruption. There are middle tints and shades between the two extremes; there is something uncertain on the confines of the two empires which they must pass through, and which renders the change easy and imperceptible.” (quoted in *Uplook*, Nov. 1998, p. 13)

Conclusion

Samuel Smiles said,

“Sow a thought, and you reap an act.

Sow an act, and you reap a habit.

Sow a habit, and you reap a character.

Sow a character, and you reap a destiny.”

It is my prayer that all of us will so think on these exercises that they truly become actions we practice daily. And as we practice them daily, I believe they will become

habits of life, as much a part of us as the water we drink, the food we eat, and the air we breathe. And as they become habits, they will shape our character. And as they shape our character, they will indeed shape our destiny as those who have over the course of a lifetime lived strong for the Lord. It is not enough to start well. It is imperative that we finish well. Strong for Jesus now! Strong for Jesus until the very end.