

Training for Life

It is hard to believe there is anything more important these days than physical exercise. After all, taking care of our bodies is essential to a healthy and enjoyable life. Martini lunches have been replaced by a quick run to the gym. Juice bars are now the new place to relax and get rejuvenated rather than hanging out in a smoking lounge. Aerobic exercise and a fit look have become vital for anyone wanting to advance their careers in entertainment, business and the arts. But, more importantly, lives are now being saved by people willing to fight disease with improved physical training and exercise. So, what in the world could be more important than physical training? Two thousand years ago, the Apostle Paul took the issue head on when he said, "...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." (1Timothy 4:7b-8) In other words, spiritual training is the only thing more important than physical training.



This November I will be leading two different groups of church leaders on mission trips to Dubai and Egypt. Taking people on cross-cultural mission trips has been the most gratifying and constant characteristic of my ministry for the past 30 years. However, as many of you know, for the past four years, I have not traveled overseas on the advice of my doctors who have been guiding me well in my recovery from non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma. And, as of this spring, both my oncologist and internist have given me permission to pursue overseas travel again, as long as I do it intelligently and well! I could not be more excited; and, I ask for your prayers as I prepare for these trips both physically and spiritually.

Cancer certainly has a way of making one focus on what is most important in your life. When I began my road to recovery, which never ends, I was told that the three most important things to pursue were proper nutrition, constant exercise, reduced stress and get plenty of sleep. These four goals have remained uppermost in my mind. They are, in fact, excellent life pursuits for all people, not just cancer survivors. I never knew, for instance, about the risks associated with our American food industry, and what foods can be either good or harmful to our bodies. And working out at the gym or taking a long walks are no longer nice options for me, but essential and highly enjoyable daily objectives. But reducing stress and getting more sleep are the most challenging goals for me. I love my work and I can easily do it all day and night long if not careful. Therefore, pursuing rest for my soul on a

daily basis has become my new frontier. The Apostle Paul's words, mentioned above, have become an inspiration and guiding light for me.

Slowly, regarding these goals in particular, I have begun to turn the ship around. I no longer race into the day like a mad man. In fact, now as the day breaks, I race to find a quiet space to be alone, read my Bible and pray. I can be in my car outside a hockey rink waiting for one of my kids' games to begin, or under a tree in a park of a city I am visiting, or in the reading chair of my office at home; it doesn't matter where I am. What matters is that I am alone with God, pouring out my worries as well as my joys at his feet; and being fed by the words of Scripture I am reading that day. Life is stressful; all of us are filled each day with conflicting and competing desires, needs, fears and regrets. It is often easy to forget that God is always ready and wanting to embrace us and help, if only we will take the time to embrace him.

Spiritual training, or growing into the likeness of Christ, requires discipline and a desire to be more peaceful, holy and wise. We are bombarded each day with meaningless messages from the world to be more successful, rich, famous, or physically beautiful. We can easily be swayed and influenced by such unhealthy enticements and the worldly tides that accompany them. The best way, however, to resist these tides and messages is to be spiritually prepared for them. This is what the Apostle Paul was talking about. Be prepared. The more time you give to the Lord on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis, the more prepared you are for life itself. Living is a full-contact sport. It comes at us aggressively and constantly each day. But, we can more than handle it with the help of our Lord.



No one knows better about the aggressiveness of life than the people in Iraq. I am privileged to know many Egyptian, Iranian and Iraqi Christians who are working tirelessly to spread the Good News of our Lord throughout the Middle East. Most of their work is underground, not easily detected or discovered by the news industry of CNN, Fox News, New York Times, or the Wall Street Journal. The Gospel is exploding throughout the Middle East, but not everyone knows that. Militant Muslim organizations such as ISIS exist because they are panicked that moderate Islam and Christianity will prevail in the Middle East. What they do not know is that faith is not something you can force on another person and that is exactly what they keep trying to do. When a religion tries to force conversion or belief, it is only a matter of time before it fails.

ISIS is trying to establish a new Muslim empire or caliphate in the Middle East. It is marauding villages, forcing people of different religions to either convert to their

radical Islamic beliefs, pay excessive taxes, or be killed. Talk about the need to be spiritually prepared! Many brave Arab Christians have chosen death rather than converting to something they do not believe. Some of the strongest and most spiritually mature Christians I have ever met live in the Middle East.

I want to mention, too, the Christian health care workers in west Africa who have been infected and died recently by the terrible Ebola virus. They are unsung heroes of our world and the kingdom of God. We may never know their names but we must remember to support them with our prayers. I heard recently that of the approximately 1,000 people who have died of the Ebola virus this year, at least 100 were Christians, working to save the lives of others. What motivated these workers? The answer is Jesus Christ who died on the cross in order to heal and save us.



**Christian health care
workers fighting Ebola**

Death is not the only thing for which a Christian prepares. We train ourselves spiritually in order to be used by the Lord on a daily basis to reach others, who are lonely, hurt and lost in the world. We train ourselves spiritually in order to offer a gentle and wise word of advice or encouragement for someone who needs it. We train ourselves spiritually for when we might be tempted to judge others, tell a lie, and go along with the crowd, steal or abuse a privilege or responsibility.

I thank God for the incredible advances our American culture has made in recent years in the areas of nutrition and physical exercise. I pray that those successes multiply a hundredfold each year. But, I pray even harder that all people will understand and pursue the importance of spiritual training in Christ. There is simply nothing more important we can do with our time or in our hearts.