

CHALLENGE OF GODLINESS

Good morning! It's a beautiful morning once again. The sun is out, the weather is nice, and all of you are here. I'm blessed to see you this morning. Why don't you say to the person next to you, "Good morning! I'm blessed to see you this morning."

So, we're on the 7th part of our series on "New Testament Challenge". Just two more and then it's Family Camp time. So, say to your neighbor, "Hang in there!".

BTW, I hope you're keeping up with your daily readings. Because, as I promised at the beginning, you get a special gift if you finished the readings by the end of this series. OK?

Today, we're looking at the challenge of godliness. We're tackling this challenge because Christians are expected to be godly in a world that is ungodly. That is what Christians are supposed to be. In fact, that is what early Christians were known for and that's why Christianity spread quickly and turned the Roman Empire upside down. In our day, we can do the same, Amen?

Now, I realize that some of you listening today you may not be followers of Jesus, yet. You may describe yourself as not even being a Christian. So you say—what does today have to do with me? But what you are going to have a chance to do today is get an inside look at what it means to be a Christian, at what it means to follow Christ, and what it means to become more and more like God's Son, Jesus. And for the rest of us who are here today, and we are followers of Jesus, what this will do for you, is I hope it will challenge you to do all that you can to pursue godliness in your life. So go ahead and bring out your outlines, if you will, and let's get ready to find our first verse. It's from I Timothy 4. And in I Timothy, in this section, the apostle Paul is comparing our Christian life to a race.

He uses an athletic metaphor. So I want you to find it in your notes, I Timothy 4:7-8. And I want to invite you to read this out loud with me together. I need you to do it with great enthusiasm. We're reading from the New Living Translation: "*Do not waste time arguing over godless ideas and old wives' tales. Instead train yourself to be godly. Physical training is good, but training for godliness is much better. Promising benefits in this life and in the life to come.*"

Now, here in I Timothy, Paul is talking about life as a race, the Christian as an athlete. He says that our Christian walk is much like an athlete who is training himself. So we have to train ourselves for godliness, just like an athlete has to train himself in a gymnasium of Paul's day. So this image of an athlete is totally stripping down, and then going into the gymnasium naked to practice is in the back of everyone's mind as Paul is writing this. And what Paul is saying is you have to be like that athlete. I don't want anyone to start stripping down at Fil-Am today, instead, what I want you to see is what Paul says that when it comes to godliness, we have to strip off everything that is going to hinder our pursuit, that is going to hinder us from meeting the challenge of godliness. So I want to challenge you to do that today. I want to challenge you to say no to some things that you need to say no to. I want to challenge you to decide today to say no to some sin that is in your life. And I want to challenge you to say yes to a greater pursuit of following Jesus Christ. In fact, that's what godliness is all about. If you will look just below your notes, I have given you a definition of godliness. So jot this down.

Godliness is the life-long process of becoming more and more like Jesus Christ. Becoming more and more like Jesus Christ. So what can you do to lay aside the things that are keeping you from becoming like Christ and then adding the things to your life that are going to make you more like Christ? The key to all of this is found in a deepening relationship with Jesus.

Because, you see, the more you know Jesus, the closer you are to Jesus, the more you are going to become like Him.

Let me give you an illustration from my life and that is, in the most important relationship that I have next to my relationship with God and Jesus Christ. And that is my relationship with my wife, Anabel. Now, Anabel and I were married back in 2003. I didn't realize that being married would change my sleeping habit. When I was single, I always went to bed at 10 PM, on the dot, then woke up at 6 am, eight hours of sleep. But, I found out, Anabel was a late-sleeper. At 10 PM, she was just getting warmed up. She is most productive late at night and up to around 2 am. She would pout and smirk if I was in bed and she was still awake. In short, her habit of sleeping late became my habit. Why? Because I was in a relationship with her. And because I was in a relationship with her I began to take on some more of her habits. Like using a certain brand of soap or shampoo or eating at restaurants I've never been to or tasting food I never tasted before. So now that we have been doing this for 14 years, I'm sure that she would say that some of my habits have rubbed off on her, too, but I could tell you that her habits certainly rubbed off on me. That's the way it is in relationships. As you get to know God more, as you get to know Jesus Christ more, His habits, His lifestyle, the fruit of His life, become your habits, become your lifestyle, become the fruits of your life. And that's the challenge of godliness. So how do we do this? What I want to do in the next few minutes is, I want to give you three practices of a godly life.

1. Permit God to mold me. Practice number one is permit God to mold me. You see, when you accepted Jesus in your life, your relationship with him began but, just like in any relationship, you have a part in fostering that relationship so that you will grow. That means, you have to allow God to transform you from the inside out.

You see, you have to give God permission. A lot of people misunderstand this. They think once they become a Christian, the transformation is just going to start. Well, in many ways it does from a spiritual standpoint. But there is also a cooperation. You see, it's possible for you and me to resist God. It's possible for you and me to keep God from changing us. In fact, I want to show you that. Over these couple of steps, I want to look at some classic passages from Scripture, and I want to begin today by looking at Romans 12:1-2. *"And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God."* Now, would you underline that phrase in your outline—I plead with you to give your bodies to God. Then, it says, *"Because of all He has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice."* Now, circle the word living and circle the word sacrifice and draw a line between them. *"The kind He will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship Him. Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you."* Underline that phrase—let God transform you. *"Into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you which is good and pleasing and perfect."*

Now, let me extract three truths from the verse. Notice first of all that phrase that I had you underline—I plead with you to give your bodies, notice that giving God permission to work in your life is a choice. It's totally up to you. You see, I want you to understand that God never works for you. God works with you in your life. Let me illustrate that from my college days. When I was in college, I may have gone a whole week without preparing for an exam, and then I would take a test and I would pray—God, please help me to pass this exam, with flying colors. And God's like—I can't help you. You never put the answers into your head at all. You see, I hadn't studied. I was praying for God to work for me. And I would say—God, supernaturally, just give me the answers. But God never works that way. God doesn't work for us. Instead, God works with us.

So, if I had been studying all week, and I take the exam, it would be perfectly appropriate for me to pray—God, please give me a good memory today. Give me quickness of mind. God, help me to remember what I have learned. This is the way that it works. God works with us. So God doesn't force Himself on you when it comes to godliness and making you more like His Son, Jesus. God works with you. So, it starts by a choice. And then look at those two words I had you circle. The word living and the word sacrifice. Your decision to permit God to mold you is like you making a sacrifice to God everyday with your body.

When you think of sacrifice, what comes to your mind? Something painful, something hard to do, and something you give up? Sacrifice is never easy. I heard the story of a ship that was starting to sink because it was overloaded with passengers. The passengers were of different nationalities. The captain then called everyone to the deck and announced that at least four people must jump off the ship to keep them afloat. Everyone became silent. You could hear a pin drop. Then, suddenly, from the back, a nervous young man, a British, stepped forward, and shouted, Long Live the King, then jumped into the water. Everyone applauded. Then, silence again. They waited who was going to be next. Then, a beautiful blond Frenchwoman, who looked brave, stepped forward, and shouted, "Vive le Roi!" then jumped into the cold water. Everybody applauded and cheered. Then, there was silence again. After a few moments, an obviously proud Japanese came marching to the front and with raised hands, screamed "Banzai!" and jumped into the water. Everybody clapped and cheered and stomped their feet. But, one more was needed. Several minutes passed. The silence was deafening. Until from the very back, a short, shy, and fearful Filipino slowly walked up to the front. People were astonished at his bravery but were looking admiringly at him.

Then, the Filipino guy raised his fist and shouted “Mabuhay!” and other Filipinos on the deck shouted “Mabuhay!”, too, feeling proud of their countryman and they were doing high-fives and then suddenly, without warning, the Filipino guy turned to the German beside him and pushed him to the water. And folks, that’s how the ship was saved by four people giving up their lives.

Seriously, folks, sacrifice is offering something that is dear to you or something you really don’t want to give up. Like Abraham who was ready to kill his beloved son Isaac because God wanted him to do that. Just imagine the pain he felt. He must have felt like a knife was being plunged into his heart while he was going through that episode in his life. God is asking us to sacrifice our bodies as well. Of course, not to kill our bodies, but to kill and destroy all our passions, ambitions, desires, whims, caprices, and anything for that matter that do not please God. Everything that is not good that our bodies crave for, in fact, our senses crave for, they should all go away. Gossip, drinking binge, gambling, indecent thoughts, malicious words, etc., they all should go away. Easier said than done, right? Unless we take seriously the word sacrifice.

So, how do we legitimately sacrifice ourselves to God every day? Well, it begins by starting our day in prayer. Begin the first part of our day saying—“God, today, I’m going to give You my life. God, for these next 24 hours, I want You to be in charge.” So, you put God first place every morning of your life. And then God can give you this prompting throughout the day. You start your day with God and God will be with you throughout the whole day. Then, beyond that, you can spend time in God’s Word. That’s what we have been doing in this New Testament Challenge. Saturating our minds every morning with God’s Word. So with God’s promptings and God’s Word in your heart, you will become more and more like God’s Son. That’s a living sacrifice.

And then look down at that last phrase that I had you underline, where it says—let God transform you. This verse says that it is a process. Becoming more and more like Jesus Christ is a process.

You see, when you become a Christian, you don't immediately become just like Jesus Christ. It's a life-time pursuit. Christians are not perfect, we still struggle with temptations and sinful behavior as many non-Christians do. But, as we go on our Christian journey, we hope to struggle less and less. This verse demonstrates that. In fact, the word "transform" that I had you underline comes from the Greek word "metamorphosis". We have that word in our English language. We all know what a metamorphosis is. A caterpillar becoming a butterfly is a wonderful example of metamorphosis. Now metamorphosis doesn't happen overnight. It takes time. It goes through stages. So God does that in your life. God will metamorphose your life from where you are to where He wants you to be, and He does it day by day, step by step, by giving Him permission to work in your life. So, would you like to become a butterfly or would you rather be a caterpillar the rest of your life? That's the first discipline of godliness, to permit God to mold you.

Now, here's practice number two.

2. Protect myself from ungodliness. Protect myself from ungodliness. Once you permit God to work in your life, now you are ready to protect yourself from ungodliness. To build some safeguards in your life that keep you from ungodly actions. And I want to challenge you to do that today. In fact, I want us to look and extract two principles that will help you build these safeguards. So two principles from this famous passage in I Corinthians 15:32-34. In your outline it says, "*...And if there is no resurrection, 'Let's feast and drink for tomorrow we die.' Don't be fooled by those who say such things, for 'bad company corrupts*

good character.’ Think carefully about what is right and stop sinning. For to your shame, I say that some of you don’t know God at all.”

Now, from this passage and the space that you have in your outlines, I want to give you two principles and I want you to jot this down. First is the principle of close associates. This passage says—bad company corrupts good character. So here’s the principle, the principle is those you spend the most time with will either pull you up or they will tear you down. They will either promote godliness in your life, or they will hinder godliness in your life. So ask yourself, who am I spending most of my time with? Am I spending my time around people who are ungodly, who are pulling me down? Now, of course, we understand as Christians we are to be salt and light of the world. We are to be godly influences in an ungodly in an ungodly world. And so you have to have some association with those who are not yet followers of Jesus. That means, sometimes you are around people who may try to pull down your faith. But you are to stand strong in that time. Then, you are also to have positive forces in your life, by spending time with other Christians, like you are doing today at church, or like you are doing in your home group. These associations, they pull you up. So you want to make sure that you are spending more time with those who pull you up than with those who pull you down. That’s the principle of close association. But then there is a second principle. It’s the principle of thought before action. If you go back up in the outline and you look at I Corinthians 15, about midway down it says, “think carefully about what is right and stop sinning.” You might want to underline that phrase. Think carefully about what is right and stop sinning. This passage says that if you don’t think before you act, you are going to find yourself in ungodly situations. Now, how many of us have done this? We didn’t think about our actions and we find ourselves in a situation that is not exactly building us up. We find ourselves in a situation that is tearing us down.

We didn't think about a relationship before we started it, and we find ourselves in a bad relationship. We didn't think about the consequences of having one too many drinks, until we find ourselves in a bad situation. We didn't think about one look at pornography on the internet would do, until we find ourselves trapped in that lifestyle. So thought before action. The Scripture says we are to always think. Think carefully about this action or that action. "Is it right? Is it going to promote godliness in my life?" And then, it says—stop sinning. If you do find yourself sinning, if you do find yourself thinking without acting and you find yourself in the place of sin, stop that as quickly as possible.

Now, that leads me to another challenging question, which is—"What is that you are doing right now that you know is wrong? Well, the Scripture's advice is to stop sinning. You can just make a choice today, to protect yourself from further ungodliness. Look, God will forgive you of that sin, but if God is speaking to you and saying—"Stop!", then think about that and put into your life safeguards to keep yourself from doing that. Make a bold decision today to stop sinning. And then look at the last part of this verse. It says, "For to your shame, I say that some of you don't know God at all." Now, this passage could be applied to our lives, whenever we do something that we know is wrong, but we continue to do it. How can we say we know God when we willfully do things that are not pleasing to him? Do we really have a relationship with him? So, I want you to build some safeguards in your life. Avoid those things or people that can lure you into sinning. Nip it in the bud, as they say. Finally, here's practice number three:

3. Pursue godly activities. Pursue godly activities. Just like you have to protect yourself from ungodliness, you have to pursue godly activities. Now godliness is a courageous pursuit, because it's something that you have to go after. It's something that you have to move toward. It's something that you have to achieve in your life.

You see, some people think that godliness just happens naturally. But we have already seen that you have to permit God to work in your life. Other people sometimes fall into this trap where they think they have arrived. And we have to be careful with that, too. None of us ever get there. Pursuing godliness is a life-long goal.

Now, in a month's time, I'm going to celebrate my birthday. To be honest, I'm not expecting any gifts. Because I want them to be a surprise. Anyway, this will be a pretty big birthday for me, because it now means that I am closer to 40 than I am to 30. Give or take 20 years. Now, as I reflect on my coming birthday, one thing that it's really screaming at me is this truth, "I am aging and I am changing". I can't deny that. I age as years go by and I change, too. 30 years ago I was so skinny my waist was just size 28 and I hated it because I always have to have a belt to keep my pants up. And today, my waist has grown to size 36 and I still hate it, with or without a belt. 30 years ago, my hair had little streaks of grey hair some people thought it was fascinating. Now, it's no longer fascinating and so I have to dye my hair every so often. But, all of us are aging and we are changing. No escaping that.

But, folks, that little statement that we are aging and we are changing is not true in our spiritual life because you see, it's possible in your spiritual life for you to age and not change. Because if you are not pursuing godly activity, you are chronologically getting older, but you are not necessarily getting older in godliness. You are not becoming more and more like Jesus Christ. And so the question is not—are you aging when it comes to your faith? The question is—are you changing when it comes to your faith? You see, age has nothing to do with godliness.

I have known people who have been a Christian for only a few years and they are, in fact, more godly than someone else who has been a Christian for over 10, or even 20 years. Age has nothing to do with it. It's about changing, it's pursuing godliness. It's allowing God to transform you inside out.

Now, let's look at Philippians 4:8-9. It says, "*Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you.*" Now, look at that. It says to meditate on things that are true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, and admirable. You see as you begin to pursue godly actions, it starts with what you are putting in your mind. So let's just ask that question—am I putting godly things into my mind? Am I surrounding myself with godly thoughts? What am I allowing into my mind? You know with our iPhone generation, what we put into our minds is very near and dear to us. We play songs, or we allow thoughts to come in. Are they godly thoughts? Are they the kind of thoughts that are true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, and admirable? That's why throughout this series, we have been challenging you to fill your mind with God's Word. But don't just fill your mind with God, fill your mind with other stuff that is good. What are you putting into your mind? Is it good stuff, or is it godly stuff? You know, maybe this week, if you want to become more like Jesus Christ, you could start by just changing what goes into your mind. And then beyond your mind, you can choose to put yourself in godly environments where your entire life is saturated with godly activity.

As I end this message, I just hope sincerely that you would put into practice these principles I've shared with you these morning. Here are some questions I'd like you to ponder on:

Where are you going to be a year from now? Where are you going to be five years from now? Where are you going to be for the rest of your life? I hope you will decide today to accept the challenge of godliness. Set the bar high. You see, it's really about relationship. It's about your relationship with Jesus Christ. As you get to know Jesus more, He will transform you from the inside out. So that's why, ultimately, godliness is about the power of God inside of us. The power of God inside of us, making us more and more like His Son, Jesus Christ. We just choose to cooperate with God. In fact, look at this last verse. It's our memory verse for the week. It's from II Peter 1:3, "*As we know Jesus better, his divine power gives us everything we need for living a godly life. He has called us to receive his own glory and goodness.*"

So, what's the key? The key is knowing Jesus better, and then God will give us everything we need to accept the challenge of godliness. And this morning, if you want to live a life of godliness and yet you don't have a relationship with Jesus yet, I encourage you to make a decision for Jesus right now. Jesus wants to change your life. That is the reason he came down to earth to die for you. He was crucified on the cross for your sins. He will enable you to stop sinning and he will give you new direction to your life. You see, he rose again from the dead. He resurrected because he wants you to resurrect as well. Figuratively and literally speaking. Your life will change if you give your life to Jesus. You will metamorphose from a caterpillar to a butterfly. The Bible says "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come." And, the real prize, however, is the gift of eternal life. He will give that to you once you receive Jesus in your heart.

Let's pray together.