

DIVINE DISCIPLINE



DIVINE DISCIPLINE

HOW TO DEVELOP
AND MAINTAIN
SELF-CONTROL

RHONDA HARRINGTON KELLEY
FOREWORD BY ESTHER BURROUGHS



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To my husband, Dr. Chuck Kelley, who has been a constant source of encouragement, love, and support since we married in 1974. His own self-discipline is an inspiration to me.



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Foreword

I feel honored to call Rhonda my friend. I have observed her as a committee member, speaker, talk show host, teacher, speech therapist, and Christian sister. She is the essence of charm and grace. I am captivated when she is speaking. No one is more articulate. It's as if each word is chosen and caressed for the listening ear. Now, she has added "author" to her list of accomplishments, and you, dear reader, will be the richer.

The book you are now holding has traveled with me all over the United States, as I disciplined myself to write this foreword. Am I ever glad I did! From beginning to end, I found help on every page, and just the help I needed in my own personal life.

What I liked best is the way Rhonda keeps pointing the reader to the Word of God. Then she gives practical, real-life applications. You will not get the feeling that she has come to these convictions easily, but rather through struggle, hard work, and discipline. She has discovered that true freedom is a by-product of "dedicated discipline." You will be glad she helps you learn the process of self-discipline.

This book will help today's woman to build self-control into her life, coming under the power of the Holy Spirit to live a godly life. I enthusiastically recommend this book!

Esther Burroughs
Speaker/Writer
Founder/Director of Esther Burroughs Ministries



Acknowledgments

It is appropriate for me to begin my acknowledgments with praise to the Lord for His guidance and strength in the task of writing this book. This message came from God, Who first convicted me about my own lack of self-control. He then helped me develop divine discipline so I could share my experience with others. The Holy Spirit has inspired my words as I have written this book. To God be the glory, great things He has done!

I also want to express deep appreciation to my husband, Dr. Charles “Chuck” Kelley, for his unconditional love, constant support, and invaluable assistance. His theological insights and technical advice were a great help in this project, as they are in any responsibility I undertake.

A special thank you to several family members and friends who gave of their time to proof this manuscript. Many of them allowed me to share some of our personal experiences. Special thanks also to my administrative assistant, Natalee Morris, and my research assistant, Laura Landry, for their help in preparing this manuscript.

I am grateful for the hundreds of Christian women who have heard this message at conferences, retreats, and luncheons. Their expressed needs prompted me to write this book, and their positive comments keep me disciplined in life. May God continue to use what He has taught me to change others.

Finally, I want to thank Pelican Publishing Company for their support and assistance in writing this book. I am grateful for the Christian testimonies of the leaders, Nancy Calhoun and Kathleen Calhoun Nettleton, and I am particularly appreciative for the

professional help of my editor, Nina Kooij. I sincerely enjoy working with the team at Pelican.

Introduction

Well, Rhonda, you can do it! It was in the 1990s when I became convicted that it *had to be done*. I finally decided I could do it. No, I actually became convinced that *God could do it through me*.

I am like many people, perhaps including you, who appear on the outside to be “in control” while on the inside are “out of control.” Yes, I have always seemed to my friends to be organized and disciplined. Well, I am organized and in control in many ways. But only the Lord and I knew that there were areas of my life out of control.

Of course, at times everyone feels utterly, totally helpless, and uncontrolled. I, too, must confess to this feeling. There are times when I give in to impulses and later regret my actions. But God was not speaking to me about momentary behaviors. He spoke to me about a greater need—the *need to be disciplined in myself*, the need for discipline of my very being.

Years ago as I prepared to teach a Bible study on the fruit of the Holy Spirit from Galatians 5, God began to do a great work in my life. At first I was intimidated by the last of the nine virtues called temperance or self-control. Who in her right mind would want to teach others about a topic so personal and revealing? But I endeavored to begin a systematic study, never realizing that *God would convict me and change me*.

I began to learn that self-control is the crowning fruit of the Spirit and that, without self-control, a Christian cannot enjoy the other eight precious blessings. I did so want to experience love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and gentleness, but I learned that I cannot have any of these without self-control. God

convicted me of the need to have self-control in order to be an obedient, maturing believer who can enjoy the fruit of Christlikeness.

At first I didn't realize that God wanted to deal with me about self-control. My biggest concern was overeating and weight control. You see, over the years, I had added some pounds. I was expert with excuses such as: "I'll start watching what I eat on Monday." "I'm big-boned and I carry my weight well." "You can't live in New Orleans and be on a diet." In fact, I had tried every fad diet known to man! As is usually the case, the pounds I lost quickly found their way back. But God had a new diet plan for me. His plan was fail-proof. He promised success from the very start.

Now this book is not a diet book. Nor does it offer a quick-fix for a lifetime of overeating. (If that is your only purpose in reading it, you'll be disappointed!) But, instead, I am sharing from my personal experience the lessons God taught me in self-discipline. For God used my concern about my weight to force me to deal with the far more important issue of self-discipline. As I focused my eyes on Him, and not on losing weight, I learned that I could claim His power to gain control over all areas of my life. God didn't want me to be skinny; He wanted me to be satisfied, happy, and at peace in every area of my life. To my surprise, as I began to gain victories in the war for self-control, the battle of weight control was won along the way.

While I am hesitant to write these words (you see, your reading means more accountability for my self-discipline), I trust that *God will speak to you personally* and convict you of the need for more discipline in your life.

Let me quickly tell you about the joy before you become overwhelmed by the sacrificial commitment. As I learned about Spirit-controlled self-discipline, I grew in my spiritual life in a way never experienced before. I became more disciplined in all areas of my life. And guess what? I lost weight. So the Lord gave me the extra blessing of a smaller body as a reward for my personal discipline and spiritual maturity.

Please keep reading—and even rereading. Allow God to use my personal journey toward spiritual discipline to encourage you. You, too, will learn that *there is great reward in leading a disciplined life*.

DIVINE DISCIPLINE



CHAPTER 1

A Harvest of Righteousness

(Discipline: Why Is It Important?)

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 (Hebrews 12:11 NIV).

Has this ever happened to you? While sitting in a lovely restaurant, a mother and child enter. The child is beautiful—long flowing blonde hair gathered back in a ribbon, dressed in a bright floral print with matching shoes and purse. However, as time passes, your impression of the precious little girl changes as she misbehaves, becoming loud and disagreeable. You realize that this young child has no self-control. The embarrassed mother has no control over her unruly daughter. What an impact on you and other patrons in the restaurant. What an impact on the child! This little girl, though beautiful in appearance, will be hindered in life both personally and socially by her undisciplined behavior.

Discipline must be taught to children by their parents. Through loving parental discipline, a child learns self-discipline and self-control. Our heavenly Father wants to teach His children self-control. Contrary to popular belief, abundant love does not make discipline unnecessary. Instead, it is because of deep love and concern that parents discipline their children and teach them self-discipline. *Discipline of self is not caught; it is taught.* While some people seem naturally to have more willpower, all of us must develop self-discipline in order to lead more productive, happy, fulfilling lives.

It is an undisciplined world in which we live! Few people today are in control of themselves. Most people have adopted the attitude:

“If it feels good, do it.” Rarely do we consider the long-term effects of our actions. Rarely do we try to control our impulses in order to change our behavior through self-discipline. As Christians we are challenged to be in control of all areas of our lives. Our human natures are carnal and of the flesh, while our spiritual natures should be righteous and holy. In fact, as Christians we should be disciplined in all areas of life—physical, mental, social, and spiritual.

Self-discipline is necessary in our personal lives and in our relationships with others. Without discipline, we cannot grow and mature. Without discipline, we cannot experience the fullness of God. Without discipline, we cannot minister to others. Since we do not want to fail in our Christian walk, we must learn self-discipline. Discipline is necessary for personal development, for spiritual growth, and for Christian service.

Personal Development

Professional athletes must be disciplined in their daily lives. In order to excel in their endeavors, personal commitment and faithful practice are required. It is usually the most disciplined athlete who wins the competition. Discipline demands sacrifice and pain. It is not easy to awaken early each morning to exercise, to train all day, to plan strategy at night, and to delay social life. But dedication and discipline pay off in the end. Many rewards of a disciplined life are invisible to the human eye, but other rewards are earthly symbols of the crowns of glory to come.

In her book, *All That Was Ever Ours*, Elisabeth Elliot discusses the reward of a disciplined athlete. While freedom and discipline have come to be regarded as mutually exclusive, freedom, in fact, is the final reward of discipline. Freedom is to be bought with the high price of self-discipline, not merely claimed. The professional athlete is free to perform in competition only because he has been

. . . subjected to countless hours of grueling work, rigidly prescribed, and faithfully carried out. Men are free to soar into space because they have willingly confined themselves in a tiny capsule designed and produced by highly trained scientists and craftsmen, have meticulously followed instructions and submitted themselves to rules which others defined (page 61).

It is only with dedicated discipline that freedom is found.

I once read a newspaper article about Olympic figure skater Brian Boitano. The caption read, “Boitano Counts His Blessings.” This young champion described his unique method of coping with the pressures of an exhausting practice schedule, frequent skating exhibitions, and grueling travel. He stated that when these demands become overwhelming, he simply “pauses and counts his blessings.” He certainly has many blessings to count! He has won gold medals in international competition and Emmy awards for television performances. His self-discipline has been rewarded with professional accomplishments. Brian Boitano discovered that freedom is not the absence of restraints. *Freedom results from the practice of necessary disciplines.*

Personal development is limited when people lack self-control. Some never graduate from high school nor achieve educational goals. Others never find fulfilling work nor accomplish professional goals. Some never build healthy personal relationships, and others develop abusive behaviors when they cannot control their excessiveness.

Development of personal character requires self-discipline in all areas of life. Discipline is necessary for health and fitness. Discipline is essential for financial stability and professional stature. For the married, discipline is needed for building relationships with spouse and children. For all Christians, discipline is the foundation for moral excellence and personal ethics. *Self-discipline is the process; personal development is the product.*

The area of my life requiring the most discipline is physical fitness. I have started many exercise programs, but have had great difficulty maintaining my commitment to them. Initially, I am enthusiastic and faithful. But, in time, I become disinterested and inconsistent. Other activities soon take priority. If I am disciplined in my physical life, then I will receive the rewards of personal accomplishment as well as health and vitality.

Jesus Himself grew in personal character. It is recorded in the Gospels that “Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men” (Luke 2:52). God demonstrated to us in the life of His own Son the importance of personal growth. As Jesus grew in size and matured in age, He also increased in knowledge and in wisdom, both in the eyes of God His Father and of humanity. As believers, we are to keep growing in our personal life as well as in our relationship to the Lord.

The Apostle Paul encouraged his friend Timothy to be disciplined in his personal life as well as in his spiritual life. In 1 Timothy 4:7,8 Paul wrote to his young disciple, “Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.” For Paul, disciplined speech and conduct were a reflection of one’s personal faith and a defense against immorality.

My husband and I had an opportunity to practice character building while we worked simultaneously on dissertations. Doctoral studies alone are intense, but writing a dissertation is the most difficult part of the process. Extensive research, endless writing and rewriting, and the dread of defending our work before a panel of experts brought tremendous pressure to our personal lives and relationship. Although abandoning the project would have made our lives easier at the moment, it would also have prevented us from attaining our educational and professional goals. Living with the restraints imposed by our academic programs drew us closer together as husband and wife and helped us complete our tasks. Without this experience in self-discipline and perseverance, we would not have the ministries God has given us today.

Many of our friends think it is a miracle we survived the stresses of that experience. However, we both saw it as a time of building up, not breaking down. There was significant growth in our personal characters. We now depend daily on those qualities we developed then—sacrifice, perseverance, and hope. The sacrifice of time and leisure activities was worth the reward of graduation. Besides that, when we speak together before a group, people enjoy introducing us as a “paradox” (pair-of-docs)!

The development of personal character requires discipline. It is not easy to keep on growing. It is much easier to be content in our present state. But God tells us to continue growing. So, discipline is necessary for personal development as well as for spiritual growth and Christian service.

Spiritual Growth

Spiritually mature Christians will admit that their spiritual growth did not come easily. In fact, giants of the faith will relate the sacrifice

and self-discipline necessary for growing in Christ. Talk to any of your spiritual heroes, and they will describe the daily discipline and selfless sacrifice of their spiritual pilgrimage.

Gordon MacDonald, in his book, *Rebuilding Your Broken World*, wrote about the price of regular discipline. “Spiritual discipline is to the inner spirit what physical conditioning is to the body. The unconditioned athlete, no matter how naturally talented, cannot win a world-class race” (page 199). The undisciplined Christian, no matter how sincere, cannot live a Spirit-filled life. Self-discipline is necessary for spiritual growth and abundant life.

Preparing to teach a Bible study requires discipline. It also ensures personal spiritual growth. Several years ago, I taught a student wives’ course entitled “Spiritual Disciplines” at the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. The students were required to keep a daily prayer journal which encouraged the development of spiritual discipline. I told them of the joy they would receive through the discipline of recording prayers and answers to prayer. I quickly realized, however, that I needed to “practice what I preach.” So I resumed a daily prayer journal, a practice I continue to this day. An activity which began as an assignment soon became a habit which resulted in holiness. Such joy and peace is mine as I exert personal discipline in my spiritual life! I can truly enjoy the fruit of the Spirit!

Paul lists the fruit of the Holy Spirit in Galatians 5:22,23. These nine virtues are to be sought by a growing Christian. Along with love, joy, and peace, the apostle includes self-control as an evidence of the Christian life. Many biblical scholars would say that self-control is the last or crowning fruit of the Spirit. Without self-control, a believer cannot experience all the blessings of the Spirit. Self-discipline then is an important part of spiritual growth and maturity.

In his book, *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard J. Foster concludes that while grace is a free gift of God, followers of Christ must pay a high price to grow in grace. Christians must sacrifice the time necessary to study the Bible, to pray to the Father, to witness to others, and to minister to the needy. This personal sacrifice of time and energy results in spiritual development. Spiritual discipline is for a definite purpose—spiritual growth.

In 2 Peter 1:4-11, Simon Peter challenges all believers to grow in their faith. He reminds us that God’s precious promises cannot be claimed without acts of faith. Among the qualities of righteousness,

Peter includes self-control:

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins (2 Peter 1:5-9 NIV).

Self-control is a grace gift from God—a quality God promises us as we experience His Spirit within us. In order to receive this gift of discipline from God, we must grow in faith—diligently increasing in wisdom and knowledge. Self-control for the believer comes by steadfast faith and spiritual growth. Peter follows his mention of self-control with a challenge for perseverance. Certainly, we must persevere in our discipline. To decide to be self-controlled is one thing—but to keep on being self-controlled is another matter. God wants us to persevere in self-control.

In his letter, Simon Peter gives us the bottom line concerning self-control and the other godly virtues. Without them, he says, we are useless, unfruitful, blind, short-sighted, and unclean. With them, however, Peter says that we are useful, fruitful, keen-sighted, and clean. The believer who practices self-control “will never stumble” (2 Peter 1:10). I want to be the kind of believer who never stumbles, don’t you? Through systematic prayer and Bible study, spiritual growth is possible for every believer.

In an evening worship service at All Soul’s Church in London, I repeated with the congregation a prayer of confession. The prayer concluded with the importance of a godly, righteous, and disciplined life.

Almighty and most merciful Father,
 we have strayed from your ways like lost sheep.
 We have followed too much our own ways and the
 desires of our own hearts.
 We have broken your holy laws.
 We have failed to do what we ought to have done;

we have done what we ought not to have done; and we cannot save ourselves.

Yet, Lord, have mercy upon us helpless sinners.

Spare those, O God, who confess their faults.

Restore those who are penitent, according to your promises declared to all men by Jesus Christ our Lord.

And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that from now on we may live a godly, righteous and disciplined life, to the glory of your holy name.

Amen.

Those words continue to remind me that righteousness and self-discipline as well as confession of sin are essential to Christian growth.

The spiritual growth of an individual believer is in great part dependent upon persistent discipline in the areas of prayer, Bible study, evangelism, missions, and service. Without self-control, a Christian fails to grow spiritually. Without persistent self-control, a child of God is disobedient and discouraged. Spiritual growth and personal development are not the only reasons for a Christian to be disciplined. It is impossible to minister effectively without self-discipline.

Christian Service

Discipline is essential for personal development and spiritual growth. However, did you know that self-discipline is also a prerequisite for Christian service? The demands of busy schedules force us to discipline our time in order to minister. We will not experience thoughtful words nor kind deeds if we do not practice discipline. God's Word also cites self-control as a necessary qualification for service.

In his instructions concerning spiritual leaders, Paul discusses the attributes of a pastor, of deacons, and even of deacons' wives. The "overseer" or pastor of a church is to be "the husband of one wife, *temperate, self-controlled*, respectable, hospitable, able to teach" (1 Timothy 3:2). Likewise, deacons are to be controlled in their personal life. They are to be men of high standing and great faith. Paul also instructs that deacons' wives are to be women worthy of respect, "not malicious gossips, but *temperate*, faithful in all things" (1

Timothy 3:11). Paul concludes that self-control is not only a quality of godly character, but a qualification for Christian service.

Discipline of self seems in New Testament letters to be a personal trait essential to church leadership. How often do we examine the self-discipline of a candidate for church office? We should ask an individual being considered for spiritual leadership about his or her ability to control outward and inward behaviors through the power of the Holy Spirit. Or, at the very least, we should observe this godly quality in an individual before entrusting spiritual leadership to him/her.

On one occasion, I had the privilege of serving on our church nominating committee. Our task was to recommend to the church the names of members who were qualified for leadership in particular areas of church life. Without exception, all of us agreed that one individual was truly qualified to teach Sunday School. I quickly volunteered to call the person, whom I had long admired for her godly character. She had always appeared to be self-disciplined in her personal life. I was both surprised and pleased at her response when I asked her to consider teaching an adult Bible class. She answered with confidence and kindness, "Teaching is not a priority in my life now. God has other things for me to do. But I will pray for you as you seek God's choice to teach the class." Her response reminded me of the importance of self-control in Christian service. Because she had determined her priorities in ministry, she declined any distraction from those priorities. Personal discipline is not only a godly virtue, but an essential part of discovering God's plan for one's life and ministry.

Any Christian desiring to be an instrument of the Lord must examine his or her self-discipline. Without self-control, a Christian is a vessel unfit for Christian service. Lack of determination can detour one from God's will. A lack of discipline in personal or spiritual life leads to failure in ministry. The Bible records the life stories of many people who were unfit for service due to their poor self-control.

Though greatly gifted by God, Samson lost his strength, his freedom, his eyesight, his dignity, and his life because of lack of self-control (Judges 16:17-21,30,31). Moses, the leader of the Hebrew people, lost his opportunity to enter the Promised Land due to his faltering discipline (Numbers 20:1-13). Eve's poor self-control meant the loss of her home (the beautiful garden of Eden) and the penalty

of sin for her children (Genesis 3). Lot's wife lost her very life when she could not keep herself from looking back on the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24-26). Their lack of self-control resulted in loss of privilege on earth and loss of usefulness for eternity.

What a great price we pay for a lack of discipline! What a great loss we suffer! Self-control is necessary to a believer for personal development, spiritual growth, and Christian service. Without self-control, a Christian is unable to build character, uninterested in spiritual maturity, and unwilling to serve others. God needs His children to be disciplined so they will be fit vessels for His service.

The Bible also includes life stories of people who were disciplined in their Christian service. Dorcas was a dedicated woman who "was abounding with deeds of kindness and charity which she continually did" (Acts 9:36). Peter's mother-in-law was healed by Jesus and immediately began helping others (Luke 4:38-39). Martha of Bethany served a meal to Jesus in her home (John 12:1-2). And Phoebe faithfully served many of the churches in Cenchreae near Corinth (Romans 16:1-2). These women of the Bible practiced self-control in order to minister to others.

Disciplined Christian service is required by all obedient believers. Jesus Christ is our perfect role model of a servant. If we desire to be like Christ, we must be servants. As Charles Swindoll wrote in his book, *Improving Your Serve*: "Since Jesus Christ, the Son of God, took upon Himself the role of a servant, so must we. The One who could have been or done anything, consciously and voluntarily, chose to be one who served, one who gave" (page 211). We must discipline ourselves to serve others unselfishly just as Christ served.

Discipline has many personal benefits, including individual development, spiritual growth, and Christian service. Painful sacrifice produces abundant blessings, according to Hebrews 12:11: "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" (NIV).

The development of self-discipline was necessary for my personal spiritual growth and personal maturity. God demonstrated that His power is substantial while my power is weak. He helped me grow spiritually in a way I've never grown before. I saw myself as a weak individual, an immature Christian who was weak in her own power.

But God showed me that as His child I had access to His infinite, supernatural power, even in the mundane events of life.

God taught me that He wants to help me gain control of all areas of my life—even the daily, unconscious acts such as eating. He assured me of the temporal and eternal rewards of a disciplined life. After all, who doesn't want to look better, feel better, and act better? But the more important and lasting truth is that self-discipline yields eternal rewards experienced not only on earth, but in heaven. *God has the power to help you gain control of your life!*

BIBLICAL STUDY

Read 2 Peter 1:4-11 in several translations of the Bible. List below the words Peter uses to describe God's promises to and qualities for the Christian who is seeking self-control.

Promises

Qualities

PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. Examine your personal character. Do you need to develop a more controlled, godly life? List here several personal traits you desire to possess and then determine to claim them.

2. What is your spiritual temperature? Are you "on fire for God" or "lukewarm in your faith"? Decide on your first step toward spiritual maturity. Write your commitment below then pray that God will

empower you to be consistent in prayer, Bible study, witnessing, and ministry.

3. If a church nominating committee was searching for church leaders who were temperate and self-controlled, would you qualify? In what ways has your Christian service been limited by your lack of discipline? Be honest with yourself as you commit your ways to the Lord.

Dear Lord,

Convict us today of the need for self-discipline in order to develop personally, to grow spiritually, and to serve faithfully.

Amen