



The New Life in Christ

Lesson 10

Godliness and Self Control in our Lives

Running the Race

In New Testament days people were very interested in athletic sports, just as they are today. Runners trained hard before races and the one who won was crowned with a wreath of leaves as a mark of honour. Twice in the New Testament, this picture of a runner in a race is mentioned when describing the life of a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ.

“Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.”
1Corinthians 9:25

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”
Hebrews 12:1-2

Athletes who train to run races live very disciplined lives. They do not smoke cigarettes or take drugs; they do not abuse their bodies with alcohol. They ‘exercise self-control in all things’ because winning the race is so important to them. This is a very helpful example for men and women who become true disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. In Hebrews 12, preparing for the Kingdom of God is described as running a race. Just as an athlete lays aside his everyday clothes because he cannot run fast in them, so a disciple of Jesus ‘lays aside every weight and sin’. Just as an athlete will give of his best in a race right up to the finishing tape, so a disciple will ‘run with perseverance the race that is set before us’. Look at these words of the apostle Paul.

“Train yourself in godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.”
1Timothy 4:7-8

Godliness is a very practical attribute, a simple definition of it is ‘honouring God in our everyday lives’. It is something we have to practise, to train at everyday. Just as an athlete will become unfit and unable to win a race if he does not train daily, so disciples of Jesus will become spiritually unfit if they do not practise godliness daily. We need to consider how we can do this practically in our lives.

The Use of our Leisure Time

When we become a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ, we make a commitment that should affect every part of our lives. One of the biggest decisions we have to make is how we spend our leisure time. In the world people spend their time and money doing things which are designed simply to please themselves and to satisfy their desires. They put what *they* want *first* and they choose friends who think in this way. They smoke and drink alcohol. They gamble. If they are young men then they will be interested in girls and having sex with them, if they are girls then they will be attracted to sex with boys.

However the Bible tells us that a disciple of Jesus Christ will put *God first* in his or her life, Jesus taught his disciples ‘seek first his (God’s) kingdom and his righteousness’. Therefore we have to make a choice about what is really important to us in our lives and this involves thinking about how we spend our time and with whom we spend it.

“Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.” James 4:4

How then should our lives be changed practically by our commitment to Christ?

Smoking and Drug Taking

The problem of smoking and drug abuse did not exist in New Testament times and therefore there is no direct teaching in the Bible about these things. We know that cigarettes and drugs are addictive, once people start to use them most cannot stop easily and some are hooked on them for life. We also know that they damage the health of those who use them, many people who smoke die from lung or heart disease caused by their cigarettes.

The other point to consider is that these things cost a lot of money. People spend money on drugs or cigarettes instead of using it to look after themselves and their families.

The Bible tells us that when we are baptized we 'put on Christ'. By this it means that he becomes the example we should follow in our new life as a disciple. The dedication of Jesus to God's word took him to a terrible death of crucifixion and Paul says of us:

"And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires."
Galatians 5:24

Obviously Paul does not mean that physically we need to be crucified as was Jesus. He does mean though that we should try to put out of our lives the things which we crave to do and which we know are sinful. Paul uses strong language here; the word 'desire' has a meaning of longing, craving for that which is forbidden. Smoking and drug taking are part of this. They become things we crave for and *must* have. They bring about a loss of self control, the addiction means that we are not in control of ourselves – we *have to* give in to the desire to light a cigarette. It is possible to get a short term feeling of happiness and peace from using these things – but it does not last, unlike the peace of God which 'passes understanding' and which will fill the life of a disciple who looks to God as the source of happiness and fulfilment in his life.

Alcohol

Some people teach that drinking any alcohol is sinful and is against Bible teaching. This is not true but we must make a distinction between drinking alcohol sensibly and getting drunk. Under the Law of Moses, wine was seen as a blessing from God (Deuteronomy 7:13) and indeed the nation of Israel was described as a vine (Ezekiel 15). However, it seems that the Bible describes the sensible use of alcohol as part of a meal or feast, for example the marriage feast in John 2 or the Last Supper (Luke 22:17-20).

However, there are many Bible passages which warn us of the dangers of drinking too much alcohol.

"Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler; and whoever is led astray by it is not wise."
Proverbs 20:1

"And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery."
Ephesians 5:18

"Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarrelling and jealousy.

But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."
Romans 13:13-14

"Wine and new wine... take away the understanding."
Hosea 4:11

The interesting point about these passages is that they tell us about the behaviour of people who get drunk. Too much alcohol makes us lose control of ourselves (which is what debauchery means) and then we do things which are wrong and may later regret such as quarrelling or fighting or immoral behaviour. We may spend money that we cannot afford and later have none to feed ourselves or our families. This is wrong in the sight of God. One of the most awful things that drunken people ever did was to make up songs about Jesus that they sang in the streets (Psalm 69:12).

Above everything else we are told about drunkenness is that those who are drunkards will not be invited into the Kingdom of God.

"Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions,

envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” Galatians 5:19-21

“But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,'... and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Matthew 24:48-51

There is another aspect to drinking alcohol though. One person can take a drink and then stop, another cannot stop and some people become physically addicted to alcohol. As disciples of Jesus we have a great responsibility for other people. Jesus tells us that we must do nothing to cause them to stumble (Luke 17:1-2). If we have friends who are addicted to alcohol, we should give up alcohol altogether in order to set them a good example and to try to help them with their problem.

There is also a good example for us to follow recorded in Leviticus 10. In Old Testament times, the priests who were on official duty at the Tabernacle were commanded by God not to drink alcohol at all (Leviticus 10:9). They needed clear minds and total control of themselves as they served God. In Romans 12, Paul wrote of our worship and service of God as if we are continually on duty before Him and so we need to have clear heads and minds at all times in our lives so that we are acceptable to the Lord.

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Romans 12:1-2

Money and Gambling

Most of the people in the world are poor and do not have much money. A few are extremely rich. It is interesting that the writer of some of the Proverbs prayed to God that he would be neither rich nor poor. It is as if he understood that both poverty and wealth bring temptations to our lives that may cause us problems.

“Two things I ask of you; deny them not to me before I die: Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, "Who is the LORD?" or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God.” Proverbs 30:7-9

It is difficult to be poor, to worry about how we will look after our families, how we will pay our debts. Sometimes poor people become desperate for money; they think that if only they were rich, then their problems would be solved. Yet the apostle Paul wrote:

“Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.” 1Timothy 6:6-10

Often this passage is misquoted as ‘money is the root of all evil’ but Paul says it is the *love* of money that is the problem. People become greedy for money, they believe that it will solve the problems of this life but we know that they can only be solved by the return of the Lord Jesus and by the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth. Paul also wrote that those who are like this will not be in this Kingdom.

“But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of **greed**, because these are improper for God’s holy people.

Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving.

For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or **greedy person**—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.”

Ephesians 5:3-5(RSV)

For these reasons we should avoid gambling which people do to get rich quickly without the effort of work. People gamble out of greed, they covet something that is not theirs and seek to get it quickly. Many men waste money on gambling and do not support their families and the Bible has strong words about this.

“But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” 1Timothy 5:8

We saw earlier in this lesson that the message of the Bible is to ‘seek first the Kingdom of God’ in our lives and to trust in God that He will take care of us as we wait the coming of His Son. This requires faith to live each day believing that, whatever happens to us, God will never leave us but will guide us to the Kingdom.

Sexual Relationships

In the next lesson we shall consider this topic in detail. However it is an important part of how we spend our leisure time. Casual sex outside of marriage is a part of many people’s lives yet the Bible is quite clear that sex outside marriage is wrong; the teaching of Jesus himself is:

“A man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh

So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” Matthew 19:5-6

Sexual relationships should be reserved for marriage and so we must be very careful about our use of leisure time and friendships with the opposite sex.

Making the most of our Time

“Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Ephesians 5:15-16

As we get older we realise how quickly time passes. The days seem to fly by and we understand that God gives us only a limited time in this life. For most people the majority of our time is spent in working in one way or another. This is right in the sight of God; we all have a responsibility to care for ourselves and our families if possible. There were brothers and sisters in the ecclesia at Thessalonica who were so excited about the return of Jesus that they gave up work and spent their days talking to each other. The Apostle Paul wrote strong words of advice to them that this was unwise and that they should work to keep themselves (2Thessalonians 3).

How then should we use our time? Paul goes on to answer this question at length in Ephesians 5 and 6. He writes about our relationships with each other within our families and within the ecclesia. He writes about our attitudes to work both as employers and employees and he tells us to be ‘strong in the Lord’. The point he makes is that our discipleship should be evident in all the everyday things we do and spend time on. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is not about saying to ourselves; ‘I must not do this, I should not do that’. It is about trying to follow the example of Jesus from our hearts in the ordinary things of our everyday lives - in everything we do. As we turn more to the example of Jesus and try to behave as he did, then we shall find pleasure in doing so, in spending our time on godly things. Our relationships with each other will become happier and more loving, our friends will be people who share our love of the Bible and who await the return of Jesus. We will spend our time on things which help us to grow spiritually and which we find deeply satisfying in our lives.

The Temple Of God

As we have seen already, a disciple of Jesus Christ has to make a decision to leave behind the things of the world and to follow the example of Jesus in his/her life. We have seen that this is described as ‘putting on Christ’ but the new life which we live is also described in a very special way.

“Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?
If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you
are that temple.”
1Corinthians 3:16-17

We must be clear about what Paul means in this passage. He does not mean that we have the Holy Spirit power of God or that it works within us to change us in any way. God does not give us His Holy Spirit power to perform miracles nor will He change us so that we become more Christ-like without any effort on our part. Perhaps these words will help us to see what he does mean.

“For to be carnally minded *is* death; but to be **spiritually minded** *is* life and peace...
But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you.
Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.” Romans 8:6, 9(RSV)

The apostle Paul picks up this idea again in Philippians 1 and 2 when he writes about believers having the ‘spirit of Jesus Christ’ or the ‘mind of Jesus Christ’. This is a lovely idea for us to think about. If we fill our minds and lives with godly thoughts and godly ways then we are like God’s temple. The temple was the place where people came to worship God, so the idea is that by honouring God in our everyday lives we are seen by Him as worshipping Him in the things we say and do. If we do this then we truly become part of His family, His sons and daughters, chosen by Him to be in His Kingdom.

“Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?
What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever?
What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.
Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you,
and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.”
2Corinthians 6:14-18

Questions

1. What does ‘Godliness’ mean?
2. Whose example should we follow when baptized?
3. Why is it wrong to get drunk?
4. Why is it wrong to gamble?
5. What does it mean to be spiritually minded?
6. What does 2Corinthians 6:14-18 mean practically for your life today?