

Spiritual Practices for Thriving Life

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Put Down the Duct Tape

How does your concept of freedom work alongside someone who loves you and guides you?

What threat do you notice most stimulating your desire to act in self-preservation?

What would happen when confronted by that threat if you were caught without any capacity for self-preservation?

What would God have to supply to protect and sustain you in that situation? Do you have the courage to pray for it as you leave your emotional duct tape behind?

Galatians 5:13-15 – ¹³For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

I) Free to Choose...

Recall to mind someone for whom you are concerned. Someone for whom your feelings are strong and positive, be it a family member, friend, or otherwise. Pick one for whom you had wisdom to share during a critical point in their life. A situation in which a decision could forever affect them, such as ruining a relationship, eliminating job prospects, destroying their health. You imagined their lives in a certain way—a good life—and were compelled to persuade them to receive wisdom that would protect that image. As much as you might have wanted, you had no ability to force the decision and could only influence their thinking. You also knew that the wrong decision would snare the person, and they would never enjoy the fullness of freedom in their choices again as they did then. We are they. This is the Christian condition.

◆**Gift of freedom:** From our earliest days we began doing things that risked our freedom. Sometimes this taught us without permanent damage. It still shaped our understanding of the world in ways challenging to override. Then there are the intractable outcomes that forever change us. Material conditions like disability, addiction, criminal records and the like. Spiritually, we are told that we become slaves to sin. Slaves we remain until by Jesus “you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters (Galatians 5:13).” Jesus divinely restored the fullness of our freedom. He asks us to care for it this time.

◆**Once bitten, twice shy:** Many have chosen poorly and discovered the love and mercy of another who came to their rescue. Perhaps this is true for the person you recalled to mind. Sometimes we learn the lesson and choose wisely from then on. Not most of us. Rescue often teaches us there is less at stake than others would have us believe. The root of the problem is the attractiveness of the unwise behavior. Wisdom does not offer the same security or thrill or pleasure or... The consequence is a risk, an uncertain outcome, and if luck is on our side, we are better off. When we are instructed “only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another (v13),” we are outraged. *What kind of freedom is this?!?!*

II) ...How Far to Go

The pursuit of our best is inherently extreme. Few of us consider this when we dream of who we want to be. When a fancy inspires us and we start to move toward our best, we often discover the extremes required and have second thoughts. The commitment to excellence dims into casual recreation. We delude ourselves to believe most comfortable equals highest potential. Life is too short to invest it all in one pursuit. Jesus gave His all to persuade us this is folly. His purpose for restoring our freedom is the pursuit of our best.

◆**All the way?** The attraction to three-point presentations is that they seem reasonable. Most of us can fit three new thoughts or behaviors into our routine. If we can't, we might be willing to drop three things to make room. One thing would be even better. On the surface, Jesus complies with our desire by offering up a single pursuit as the path to our best. Except that “the whole law is summed up in a single commandment (v14).” The assumption that selecting a few rules would fit neatly alongside most of our current life is wrecked. We are called into freedom to pursue nothing less than the extremity of our purpose.

◆**In what direction?** If we must go to an extreme in pursuit of our best, there are some directions we prefer. Some monastic traditions set out in the direction of leaving all temptation behind by seeking a life of extreme solitude. While this may lead to extreme discomfort, it neglects what Jesus said is the expression of being our best. He told us “You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (v14).” This direction leads into spiritual territory on which we thrive. Putting others' needs ahead of ours demands faith that God will provide. It requires perfect compassion, patience, and hope, which God promises to supply for His glory. In this we find divine healing for us and our neighbor. The extreme end of this direction is our best, a pure reflection of Jesus contained in our unique person.

III) ...What to Leave Behind

The few willing to truly pursue their best, the extreme of our potential, are intent on going far. The further we want to go, the faster we must move, the lighter the burden we can carry. The Christian life demands faith in the Father to supply everything we need along the way. If we load up the provisions that we think we need, we are certain to come up short. Jesus' wisdom is that finishing well requires starting well. We must travel light.

◆**Mix and match:** We are tempted to bring along the supplies that have served us well time and time again. Self-preservation has been our emotional duct tape. When our feelings demand attention, the instinct for self-preservation kicks in and justifies whatever it is we need to restore balance. Pursuing our best is a spiritual adventure though, not emotional. The emotions, the mind, the body, they must serve the spirit. Jesus is actively persuading each of us to leave self-preservation behind, or risk that we will “bite and devour one another (v15).” Self-preservation sacrifices anything and anyone in its way. Any weakening of the Gospel to permit self-preservation denies the fullness of Christ's deity—just another self-help fad.

◆**Combustible combination:** We relate to the monastics. Abandoning self-preservation leaves us vulnerable to everything. Seclusion is the last line of our own defense. When committed to self-preservation, we must “take care that you are not consumed by one another (v15),” even with our closest allies. Jesus modeled our full potential in the Spirit—the extreme commitment to loving those who do not deserve it. We cannot be God's beloved if we do not let Him be the source of love to which we turn to for survival. Until we drop ol' trustworthy, we have no hope of reaching our destination.