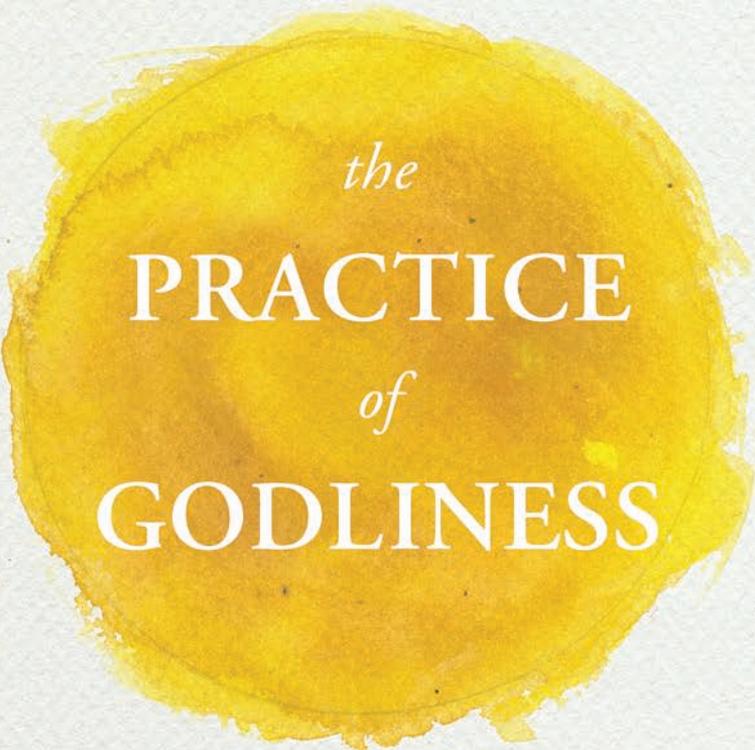


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The Practice of Godliness

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PREFACE

This book is a sequel to an earlier book, *The Pursuit of Holiness*.

In Ephesians 4:20-24, Paul urges us to put off our old self and put on the new self. *The Pursuit of Holiness* dealt largely with putting off the old self—dealing with sin in our lives. *The Practice of Godliness* focuses on putting on the new self—growing in Christian character.

The most well-known list of Christian character traits is the nine-fold list in Galatians 5:22-23, which Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit. But there are other lists in passages such as Colossians 3:12-16, Ephesians 4:2-3 and 32, James 3:17, and 2 Peter 1:5-7 that are just as important to our understanding of what constitutes Christian character. I've incorporated most of these in this series of studies.

While in the process of doing a series of Bible studies on Christian character traits, I became interested in the subject of godliness. As my knowledge of that topic grew, I became convinced that any treatment of Christian character would be incomplete without the inclusion of a study on godliness.

Godliness is more than Christian character. It covers the

totality of the Christian life and provides the foundation upon which Christian character is built. Thus the first four chapters deal with the general theme of godliness, and the remaining chapters consider important character traits of the godly person.

The order in which the studies of the various character traits appear is deliberate. The first four—humility, contentment, thankfulness, and joy—deal largely with our relationship to God. The next group of three—holiness, self-control, and faithfulness—are qualities that require us to deal sternly with ourselves. The final six—peace, patience, gentleness, kindness, goodness, and love—are qualities that enable us to deal graciously and tenderly with others. These last two divisions reflect the seeming dichotomy of Christian character: sternness with ourselves and tenderness toward others. Only the Holy Spirit can create such a beautiful diversity of sternness and tenderness within a single human personality.

The variety of topics covered in a book of this nature requires that each subject be treated only briefly. My objective is to create an awareness of the importance of each of the aspects of godliness and provide some practical suggestions for growing in them. Hopefully, many readers will be stimulated to do further study on some of the topics of particular interest to them.

As I studied the subjects of both godliness and Christian character, I was somewhat amazed that I could find so little that has been previously written on these subjects. Consequently, I have had to plow new ground in some areas. This has forced me back to the Scriptures more than if I had had the advantage of the writings of previous generations. My one qualification for presenting these studies, then, lies in thirty years of personal Bible study using methods and tools available to any layman.

PREFACE

There is a certain sense of anxiety in committing these studies to print that comes from the warning of James that “not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1). I am keenly aware of the need for more growth in my own life in many of the areas covered in this book. It is my prayer, however, that both author and readers will grow together as we practice godliness.

This book should be studied more than read. To facilitate that study, I have prepared a companion discussion guide to be used in conjunction with it. Though the book text is complete in itself, the use of the companion Bible study will enable the reader and student to gain a better grasp of the scriptural truths taught.

I am deeply indebted to the staff of NavPress for their encouragement to write this book and for their help in preparing the manuscript for final production.

CHAPTER ONE

VALUE FOR ALL THINGS

*For physical training is of some value,
but godliness has value for all things,
holding promise for both the present life
and the life to come.*

I TIMOTHY 4:8

There is no higher compliment that can be paid to a Christian than to call him a godly person. He might be a conscientious parent, a zealous church worker, a dynamic spokesman for Christ, or a talented Christian leader, but none of these things matters if, at the same time, he is not a godly person.

The words *godly* and *godliness* actually appear only a few times in the New Testament, yet the entire Bible is a book on godliness. And when those words do appear they are pregnant with meaning and instruction for us.

When Paul wants to distill the essence of the Christian life into one brief paragraph, he focuses on godliness. He tells us that God's grace "teaches us to say 'No' to *ungodliness* and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and *godly* lives" as we await the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (Titus 2:11-13, emphasis added). When Paul thinks of his own job

description as an apostle of Jesus Christ, he describes it as being called to further the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth that leads to *godliness* (see Titus 1:1).

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul emphasizes godliness. We are to pray for those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all *godliness* and holiness. We are to train ourselves to be *godly*. We are to pursue *godliness*—the word *pursue* indicating unrelenting, persevering effort. *Godliness* with contentment is held forth as great gain; and finally, *godliness* has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.

When Peter, in looking forward to the day of the Lord when the earth and everything in it will be destroyed, asks what kind of people we ought to be, he answers that we are to live holy and *godly* lives (see 2 Peter 3:10-12). Here Peter uses the most momentous event of all history to stir us up to our Christian duty—to live holy and *godly* lives.

Surely, then, godliness is no optional spiritual luxury for a few quaint Christians of a bygone era or for some group of super-saints of today. It is both the privilege and duty of every Christian to pursue godliness, to train himself to be godly, to study diligently the practice of godliness. We don't need any special talent or equipment. God has given to each one of us "everything we need for life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3). The most ordinary Christian has all that he needs, and the most talented Christian must use those same means in the practice of godliness.

What then is godliness? What are the marks of a godly person? How does a person become godly? I have asked a number of people the question, "What do you think of when you

think of godliness?” The answers, though varied, always end up expressing some idea of Christian character, using such expressions as “Godlike,” “Christlike,” or “the fruit of the Spirit.” Godliness certainly includes Christian character, but it is more than that. There is another, even more fundamental aspect of godliness than godly character. It is the foundation, in fact, on which godly character is built.

DEVOTION IN ACTION

The Bible begins to give us some clues about godliness in its earliest pages. Genesis 5:21-24 tells us about Enoch, the father of Methuselah. In a very short three-verse summary of Enoch’s life, Moses twice describes him as one who “walked with God.” The author of Hebrews gives Enoch a place in his great “Faith Hall of Fame” in chapter 11, but he sees Enoch from a slightly different perspective. He describes him as “one who pleased God.” Here, then, are two important clues: Enoch walked with God, and Enoch pleased God. It is evident from these two statements that Enoch’s life was centered in God; God was the focal point, the polestar of his very existence.

Enoch walked with God, he enjoyed a relationship with God, and he pleased God. We could accurately say he was devoted to God. This is the meaning of godliness. The New Testament word for godliness, in its original meaning, conveys the idea of a personal attitude toward God that results in actions that are pleasing to God.¹ This personal attitude toward God is what we call devotion to God. But it is always *devotion in action*. It is not just a warm, emotional feeling about God, the kind of feeling we may get while singing some grand old hymn of praise or some modern-day chorus of worship. Neither is devotion to

God merely a time of private Bible reading and prayer, a practice we sometimes call “devotions.” Although this practice is vitally important to a godly person, we must not think of it as defining devotion for us.

FOCUSED ON GOD

Devotion is not an activity; it is an attitude toward God. This attitude is composed of three essential elements:

- The fear of God
- The love of God
- The desire for God

We will look at these elements in detail in chapter 2, but for now, note that all three elements focus upon God. *The practice of godliness is an exercise or discipline that focuses upon God.* From this Godward attitude arises the character and conduct that we usually think of as godliness. So often we try to develop Christian character and conduct without taking the time to develop God-centered devotion. We try to please God without taking the time to walk with Him and develop a relationship with Him. This is impossible to do.

Consider the exacting requirements of a godly lifestyle as expounded by the saintly William Law. Law uses the word *devotion* in a broader sense to mean all that is involved in godliness—actions as well as attitude:

Devotion signifies a life given, or devoted to God. He therefore is the devout [godly] man, who lives no longer to his own will, or the way and spirit of the world, but to the sole will of God, who considers God

in everything, who serves God in everything, who makes all the parts of his common life, parts of piety [godliness], by doing everything in the name of God, and under such rules as are conformable to his Glory.²

Note the totality of godliness over one's entire life in Law's description of the godly person. Nothing is excluded. God is at the center of his thoughts. His most ordinary duties are done with an eye to God's glory. In Paul's words to the Corinthians, whether he eats or drinks or whatever he does, he does it all for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Now, it is obvious that such a God-centered lifestyle cannot be developed and maintained apart from a solid foundation of devotion to God. Only a strong personal relationship with the living God can keep such a commitment from becoming oppressive and legalistic. John writes that God's commands are not burdensome; a godly life is not wearisome, but this is true only because a godly person is first of all devoted to God.

Devotion to God, then, is the mainspring of godly character. And this devotion is the only motivation for Christian behavior that is pleasing to God.

This motivation is what separates the godly person from the moral person, or the benevolent person, or the zealous person. The godly person is moral, benevolent, and zealous because of his devotion to God. And his life takes on a dimension that reflects the very stamp of God.

It is sad that many Christians do not have this aura of godliness about them. They may be very talented and personable, or very busy in the Lord's work, or even apparently successful in some avenues of Christian service, and still not be godly. Why?

Because they are not devoted to God. They may be devoted to a vision or to a ministry or to their own reputation as a Christian, but not to God.

Godliness is more than Christian character; it is Christian character that springs from a devotion to God. But it is also true that devotion to God *always* results in godly character. As we study the three essential elements of devotion in the next chapter, we will see that all of them, individually and collectively, must express themselves in a life that is pleasing to God. So the definition of godliness we will use in this book is *devotion to God that results in a life that is pleasing to Him*.

In the first few chapters of this book we will concentrate on this devotion, seeking to understand what it is and why it results in Christian character. In the later chapters we will look at individual traits of godly character. But we must never lose sight of the fact that devotion to God is the mainspring of Christian character and the only foundation upon which it can be successfully built.



DISCUSSION GUIDE

HOW TO USE THIS DISCUSSION GUIDE

This Bible study is designed to be used in conjunction with the book *The Practice of Godliness*. It may be used for personal Bible study, Sunday school classes, or Bible study discussion groups.

Please notice that the lessons in this study guide don't correspond directly to the chapters in the book. Some of the book chapters are combined in the study lessons. We created the study guide this way to compress the lessons into a shorter amount of time (twelve weeks, if you do one per week) than the book would allow (eighteen chapters).

Although intended as a companion to *The Practice of Godliness*, this study is designed to direct you first into the Scriptures and then into the author's text. Seeing and understanding what the Scriptures say on a subject is much more important than demonstrating that you know what the book says. For this reason, please complete the study questions based

on Scriptures pertaining to each chapter before reading the corresponding chapters in the book. Ideally, the author's text will simply reinforce what you have already learned directly from the Bible. If, after reading the author's text, you wish to revise any of your answers, do so in the margin of this study.

The goal of any Bible study should be the *application* of practical, biblical truths to your daily life. As James says, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (1:22). For this reason, the last question of each lesson is an opportunity for you to write down a personal application from the study. To be of value, this application should be specific and practical, with some personal checkup built into it. Only in this manner will we avoid the danger that James warns us about.

LESSON ONE

THE FOUNDATION
FOR GODLINESS

(Chapters One and Two)

1. Godliness is more than a character trait. It is a foundational spiritual quality that makes the entire Christian life dynamic, effective, and pleasing to God. To gain a clearer picture of this vital quality, look up the following verses of Scripture and write down the key thought about godliness found in each passage.

1 Timothy 4:7

1 Timothy 4:8

1 Timothy 6:6

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1 Timothy 6:11

Titus 2:11-12

2 Peter 1:3

2 Peter 3:10-12

2. Thinking about the information you compiled in question 1, how would you summarize the value of godliness in two or three sentences?

3. What two important facts do Genesis 5:21-24 and Hebrews 11:5 tell us about Enoch?

How do these two passages describe a godly person?

DISCUSSION GUIDE

4. Read chapter 1 of *The Practice of Godliness*. How is godliness defined on page 3?

Does this definition differ in any way from what you have understood godliness to be in the past? What is new to you about the book's definition?

What are the three essential elements of devotion to God? (See pages 4–6.)

What other elements do you feel are important in devotion to God?

Write down any other truths from chapter 1 of *The Practice of Godliness* that are especially meaningful to you.

5. Some people consider the “fear of God” to be basically an Old Testament concept. How do the following passages demonstrate that the fear of God is still important for us today?

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Isaiah 11:1-3

Acts 9:31

1 Peter 1:17

6. The Bible describes two apparently contradictory attitudes the Christian ought to hold toward God: fear and confidence. What insights do the following passages suggest to you about how you can hold both these attitudes in your heart at the same time?

Romans 8:15; 1 Timothy 6:15-16; Hebrews 10:19;
12:28-29

7. What does 1 John 4:8-10 teach us about the extent of God's love?

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Can you think of other passages of Scripture that teach the same idea?

8. How personal did Paul believe God's love was, and what effect did this personalized love have on him? (See 2 Corinthians 5:14-15; 1 Timothy 1:14-16.)

9. How do the following verses describe the desire the writers of Scripture had for God?

Psalm 27:4

Psalm 42:1-2

Psalm 63:1

Philippians 3:10

