

Exercising the Will

Merry Christmas! I wish you and your loved ones the sweetest, Christ-filled Christmas season. As we continue to remember and celebrate the birth of our Savior God who put on human flesh some two millennia ago, let me share something that has been brewing in my life for the last couple of months. I pray that it will encourage you and add a few more arrows to your sling in your fight for freedom as we head into the New Year.

There is nothing in the world like high school sports. My favorite, by far, was football. There was just so much to it: Summer passing camp... rewards for long hours spent in the weight room...weight testing day...the practices...two-a-days...the *end* of two-a-days...monkey drills...the sled...the first scrimmage...decorations the cheerleaders put in the lockers...the food our mothers made for us before games...wearing jerseys around school on game day...GAME DAY...getting 'in the zone' before the game...pre-game warm-up and scrimmage...and finally THE GAME...

Anyone who played has a hundred memories of all these things and so much more. If you played a different sport, you could write another list just as long, and suddenly you're brought back to the field where it all happened.

One of my best memories of high school football is my senior year training camp. After we had conditioned hard at home for a couple of weeks, we went away to an old boy scout campground to learn our plays, start hitting and tackling, and to build team unity. We would practice at least twice a day (thus the term "two-a-days.") The rest of the time we'd just hang out around the old paint-chipped cabins and the weedy lake with a thousand mosquitoes swarming in the hot summer haze, and try to steal as many 1-inch-thick mattresses as possible from the unoccupied cabins to rest our bruises before another day when it all started again. It wasn't the Gettysburg backdrop that the *Remember the Titans* guys trained in, but it was perfect. I loved it. We all did.

Honestly, the best part of it was the practices themselves. Coach Adams never stopped yelling from the beginning of the day until the last whistle released us for supper, and I don't think a one of us minded it. There was this one hill that he made us run up and down over and over and over again. We ran up a root-covered dirt path cut in grass as tall as our waists. I don't know what it was, but we had more fun every time we ran up and down that stubborn hill. Toward the end some guys slid to the finish as they sprinted down.

It was no coincidence that we enjoyed that hill, or those practices. We had a winning season that year, and even the couple of teams who beat us admitted the same thing as all the others did: we were brutally physical, and we were in great shape. I know Coach Adams pushed us more than any other coach in our conference that year.

What I didn't tell you is how miserable the weeks before training camp were...for nearly all of us. A lot of guys on the team were strong from working out all summer in the weight room, but overall we were sorely out of shape. And getting in shape is nowhere near as fun as staying

in shape. When we started conditioning that year, I didn't think we'd ever be in shape enough to start winning ball games. The first day of conditioning is always the worst day of the year. But we forced ourselves—and one other—through that first day, and we were stronger. Then we made it through the next day, and we were stronger still. Each day we were in better shape than the day before, and the better shape we were in, the more fun we had. That's why we had such a blast at camp, and it's why we won so many football games.

There's a good reason why I took you through this Uncle Rico experience of mine, and it relates very poignantly to sexual purity. But it isn't limited to the issues or the audience of *Sex and the Single Guy*. This is something that speaks to guys and girls, and to any number of our daily struggles. The issue is self-control, or the strength of our will. In the past couple of months, I've made an important discovery: our wills can be worked out just like our bodies. And I've started practicing how to do it.

Much like physical exercise, the will is exercised and strengthened through 1.) submission — just getting it done even when it hurts and you'd like to do other things, 2.) fun activity — tricking yourself into productivity with something both fun and productive like you can trick yourself into exercise, and 3.) rest — both physical and volitional strength is renewed with rest. What is rest in this context? Rest is both getting a good night's sleep and taking a break to worship, fellowship, read, listen to music, or otherwise unwind in a way that doesn't steal your sense of strength. I believe each of these is essential for a strong, disciplined will.

Also, like physical exercise, failure to submit and exercise the will causes atrophy very quickly. Ignore what you ought to do and do something else instead, whether it's clearly destructive or just a more innocent waste of time, and it will be as harmful as missing several physical workouts or more, and it will take a number of will-workouts to bring yourself back to the level of volitional strength you were at.

You won't see progress if you're in the habit of skipping workouts.

Also, you don't walk into the gym after playing couch commando all your life and expect to do the workout of an Olympic Athlete. You would take it one step at a time. However, I do believe that many times God can help us break bad habits very quickly – much faster than we can get in shape physically.

This is where *Sex and the Single Guy* meets “Exercising the Will.” One of the devil's cleverest tactics is to make us think that when the battle for purity doesn't have a knife to our throat threatening to end us, there is then no danger present and we may drop our guard. If we are caught up in a bad habit that makes us feel terrible about ourselves, we will probably be moved to action. So we take whatever steps are necessary to break those strongholds in our lives. But if we tolerate a lot of other little sins and become apathetic about many of the things we know we ought to be doing every day to keep ourselves strong – like spending some hungry time in God's Word and prayer, or getting enough sleep and exercise, or living blamelessly – then weeds of weakness will begin to grow in our hearts, and we may find ourselves right on track to commit the especially vexing and destructive sins from before. Jesus told us in Matthew 5 that the little sins really are the same in God's eyes as the ones that stand out in our eyes—and I think it's because the little ones lead to the big ones. Paul warns us about apathy toward sin: “So if you think you're standing firm, be careful that you don't fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12.)

What exercising the will means for you may be different than it does for me, but I'm talking about living blamelessly and self controlled, so that we may be ready to resist and run from temptation when it comes. I'm also talking about something more than that—I believe that it takes a strong will and a blameless life to allow us to seize the abundant life that Jesus talks about in John 10:10. This is the life that inspired Steven Curtis Chapman to sing that there's “More to this life than living and dying, more than just trying to make it through the day.”

What do you do that makes you feel strong? What are you convicted you ought to do today? What makes you feel weak, and you know you ought to avoid? James tells us “Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins” (4:17.) What do you know you ought to do? Your list may be somewhat different than mine, but here are a few areas to consider:

- Spend quality time in prayer and Bible study
- Mortify the little sins, so they don't grow into bigger ones
- Be an excellent, diligent worker at my job
- Be punctual to all my commitments
- Manage my money faithfully
- Manage my time wisely--don't waste a minute of it, and prioritize to accomplish what's most important
- Call my mom and dad
- Read more books than I watch movies
- Find opportunities to feed the homeless
- Love those close to me and even strangers as myself
- Get enough sleep and exercise, and eat right
- Seize the day, and have a blast doing things I enjoy that honor the Lord, like going out with friends, snowboarding, or flying (in an airplane)

I am learning a lot about diligence being in the military. Consider this excerpt from the book *In His Service: A Guide to Christian Living in the Military* by Rick Bereit. I commend it to anyone in or going into the military. In chapter 13 he talks about diligence at work, but it can also apply to any area of our lives.

Diligence is almost always rewarded. Look at this promise from the Bible:

The sluggard craves and gets nothing, but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied. Proverbs 13:4.

If you come from a background of laziness, expecting others to do things for you, it will take time to change. Diligence is a learned character trait best taught by modeling. When you see it in others, you appreciate it and begin to duplicate it. Others then see it in you, and the process continues.

This isn't a new message. Countless around us are longing for and preaching the same. For years *Nike* has heralded its motto: “Just do it.” Even Larry the Cable Guy has further popularized the idea with, “Get ‘er done!” And then my favorite—an exchange between the great General-turned-*Gladiator* and his servant:

Maximus: Do you find it difficult to do your duty?

Cicero: Sometimes I do what I want to do. The rest of the time, I do what I have to.

There is a lot of wisdom in what Cicero said. And many men and women have lived lives so diligent and self-controlled that you would wonder where they got their strength. I believe it grew. It was practiced, cultivated, and exercised. And they did all this without the help of the Holy Spirit! There is an uncanny potential for productivity in any child of God. “You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.” (1 John 4:4.)

So exercise the will today, in the Lord's strength, by His grace, and for His sake and your own. Let us not think that just because we do something in the Lord's strength, He will do it for us. If that were so, He wouldn't have commanded us repeatedly to be so strong and diligent (see

the verses below.) Exercise the will today so you can see the chains of sinful struggles – both large and small – broken in your life. Exercise the will today so you may enjoy the abundant life Jesus is so excited to give you. You can live stronger today than you did yesterday. If you ever skip a workout one day, don't throw in the towel and quit; you're still so much stronger than you were when you started. Cry out to God and jump right up on your feet. Be strong and courageous. Seize the abundant life today.

- **Joseph Knable**

Some Verses to Consider (emphasis added):

- ❖ *Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be STRONG. Do everything in love. (1 Corinthians 16:13-14)*
- ❖ *Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men. (Colossians 3:23)*
- ❖ *Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins. (James 4:17)*
- ❖ *He whose walk is blameless is kept safe, but he whose ways are perverse will suddenly fall. (Proverbs 28:18)*
- ❖ *He will keep you STRONG to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 1:18)*
- ❖ *Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.
He gives STRENGTH to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.
Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;
but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their STRENGTH.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint. (Isaiah 40:28-31)*

Share Your Story!

This is what I have been learning this month. What about you? What's your story regarding sexual purity or the abundant life? If you have a story to share or feedback from reading the book or this article, please go to www.josephknable.com and click on "Contact" and then "Share Your Story." I hope to hear from you!

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