

Pressing on to know Christ

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 January 2012

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 01] What kind of person would you like to be? What kind of person would you like to become in 2012?

Without trying to imagine what the right answer is, I wonder if you could just for a moment, as honestly as you are able, come up in your own mind with a couple of adjectives to describe the kind of person you would like to be.

What would be that image that you have of what you would like to be, the kind of person you would like to be? Well, that maybe requires a bit more time than just a fleeting moment.

I wonder, would you like to be a godly man? Do you desire to be a godly woman? And again, we know what the right answer is or should be, but as honestly as you can, think what your answer to that is.

Is that something that you desire, to be a godly person? Now, it's possible that this question that I've just posed is maybe a little difficult in the sense that you might honestly say, well, I'm not very sure exactly what that is.

[1 : 26] What is it to be a godly person? What does that look like? What does that involve? What would I be like if I were a godly man, a godly woman, a godly child, a godly young person?

What does that look like? Difficult to say whether you want to be something if you're not very sure what it actually is. I wonder what kind of mental image we have in our mind when we think of somebody who's godly.

What does that look like? What does that person look like? Well, this evening we want to think about this matter as we return to Paul's use of sporting or athletic imagery to describe or illustrate the Christian life.

This morning it was the language of pressing on and straining towards the finishing line and winning the prize. Well, this evening we want to think of what the serious athlete needs to do in order to win the race.

And what the serious athlete needs to do, if that is their goal, is they must train. They must train in order to gain that prize that they long for.

[2 : 42] I want to read in 1 Timothy chapter 4. Now, the passage that we read in 1 Corinthians also speaks of this matter of training. And Paul returns to that theme in his letter to Timothy.

In 1 Timothy chapter 4, and we'll read verses 7 and 8. And it's these verses in particular that we want to spend some time considering this evening.

So, 1 Timothy chapter 4 and verses 7 and 8. Here Paul, the elder statesman, as it were, is giving instructions, practical instructions, to Timothy concerning ministry.

And he gives these instructions in the context of Timothy as a minister of the gospel. But the instructions that he gives, the advice that he gives, the exhortation that he delivers to Timothy is entirely applicable to all of us as Christians.

And certainly, the words that we are going to consider this evening. So, we'll read these two verses, chapter 4 and verses 7 and 8. Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales.

[4 : 07] Rather, train yourself to be godly. 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.

So, here again, Paul, as he did in his letter to the Corinthians, uses this language of training. And training very specifically with this aim.

Train yourself to be godly. That is the aim. That is the purpose of the training that he speaks of.

That Timothy would be a godly man.

A godly minister. A godly disciple of Jesus Christ. We want to think about this matter of godliness.

The first thing we need to do is ask the question and seek to give an answer to it of what is

godliness?

What is it that Paul would have Timothy be? What is godliness? What is involved in being a godly person?

[5 : 16] The text, the verses that we've read, also touch on the matter of the value of godliness. And we want to think about that. What value does it hold?

Is it a worthwhile thing to be godly? Having established what it is, to consider what Paul says concerning its value, what it's worth. And then, finally, how can we become godly?

Having established what it is, having been persuaded, I hope, of its great value, a reasonable question would be, well, what is involved in becoming a godly?

And Paul addresses that matter also. Very particularly in the language of being trained in godliness or for godliness.

But first of all then, to think about this question, what is godliness? It's quite difficult to quickly or simply come up with a definition of the word, or to discover the meaning of the word that Paul uses.

[6 : 25] It's not a straightforward matter. The reason why it's not a straightforward matter is that the word that Paul uses here, translated in our Bibles as godly, is a word that was current in Paul's day, and was used very generally to describe someone who was religious or pious.

It's not a Christian word, if I can put it that way. It was a word that was generally used, as I say, to describe a religious person, a pious person.

And it could be used legitimately, rightly, in terms of its meaning of a sincere follower of any religion. You know, Paul himself, in his days as a persecutor of the disciples of Jesus Christ, could have been described as a godly Jew using this word.

He was committed in his own mind, in his own manner of thinking, committed to his God and sought to live a life that was consistent with that commitment. Equally, you could have religious, sometimes the word is translated religious.

So you could have religious or godly pagans. Now, the juxtaposition of the words godly and pagan seems very strange to our ears. But the word that Paul is using could be used, could have been legitimately used, of pagans who were committed to their own brand of religion, whatever it might have been.

[7 : 56] To just give a little bit more of a flavor of the word that Paul is using here, the verbal form of the word, the word that we have here is the noun, but the verbal form of the word can be translated as worship.

And it's interesting, I'm not sure how significant, but curious, interesting certainly, that this is the verb used by Paul of the citizens of Athens, worshiping their unknown God.

The verbal form of the word that we have here, godly or godliness, that's the verb Paul uses, as I say, to describe the pagan Athenians, worshiping in the manner that they sought to do their unknown God.

And so, pagan Greeks are effectively being described by Paul as religious, and we don't have a problem with that. Seems reasonable. Yes, they were religious. But we could certainly apply this word, that in this context is translated godly, to these citizens of Athens, religious people, or, if you wish, godly.

The two key elements in the non-Christian usage of the word involve devotion to God, or a deity of some kind, and a conduct that is consistent with that professed devotion.

[9 : 26] It would seem that these two elements needed to be present for somebody to be described as godly, religious, or the Greek word that's used here. A commitment to their god, but also a life that in some measure was consistent with that.

And if those two elements were present, then this word could rightly apply to such a person. Now, what Paul does, as he does with other words as well, is that he, if you wish, Christianizes the word. He adopts it for his own purposes. And it's almost as if it is a word that was searching for its true meaning, and the gospel provides content to the word.

A word that had been used in a multiplicity of ways, to describe all kinds of people of a religious disposition, and it's almost as if now the word, if words have a sense of purpose, well, it reaches its sense of purpose as Paul adopts it for describing the Christian.

Now, as Paul does adopt it for Christian usage, in many ways it keeps its essential elements in terms of its meaning, and one way in which it is defined, as I say now in its Christian usage, in the way that Paul is using it, is in the following way.

[10 : 59] Godliness denotes that piety, which characterized by a godward attitude, does that which is well-pleasing to him. That's one definition that is given for godliness.

And you see, it has those two elements, a devotion to God and a life that is consistent with that professed devotion. There's one author on the subject of godliness that I would heartily recommend.

I meant to bring the book just to show it to you, just so that you could see the cover. An author who, I think some of the folks here have been using one of his titles, in one of the ladies' Bible studies, Jerry Bridges, who has worked for many years with the Navigators.

When I was very young, I say very young, when I was in my late teens, I read one of his books that had a significant impact on me, called *The Pursuit of Holiness*. And then he followed up that book, *The Pursuit of Holiness*, with a book, *The Practice of Godliness*, where he discusses in some length, or at some length and in some depth, this question of godliness.

And he gives a working definition of the word in that book that I make reference to. And he says this, that godliness is devotion to God, which results in a life that is pleasing to him.

[12 : 22] So again, we see the two elements. There needs to be that devotion to God, but that devotion to God is accompanied by. Indeed, evidence of its sincerity, of its genuineness, is that there is, together with that devotion, a life that is pleasing to him.

Of course, you could say that a life pleasing to God is an act of devotion to God. But you can see, however way we look at it, that there are these two elements, that though connected, it can be distinguished.

The foundation is devotion to God, or the worship of God, and from that source proceeds a life lived in a God-pleasing manner.

Now, we can maybe further develop the concept of godliness in the light of what we know about God in the person of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, the need for this development of the term and of its meaning becomes particularly evident when we notice how Paul himself has used this very word in the lead-up to what he says in our text.

[13 : 29] Notice at the end of chapter 3 and in verse 16 that this word appears again. Well, it appears before our text. And so it seems reasonable to imagine that Paul would not have used it in verse 16 of chapter 3 and then use it in chapter 4 with no sense of there being a connection.

So what does he say in verse 16 of chapter 3? Well, he says this, Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great. And what does he go on to do? Well, he goes on to describe Jesus.

He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed in the world, was taken up in glory. Now, it's not our purpose, nor do we have the time to even think about what he says about Jesus.

But the interesting thing is the way he introduces what he says about Jesus. The mystery of godliness is great. And so when we think about what godliness means, we do need to bring to the table, as it were, the person of Jesus Christ and who he is and how his person and his work informs us in understanding what godliness is all about.

Christ, in a sense, who he is and what he came to do, brings definitive meaning to the very word, godly or godliness.

[14 : 59] Christ is at the heart of true religion. Christ is the worthy object of man's devotion. Christ is the one the godly live to please.

So, bringing or introducing the person of Jesus Christ to our consideration of this word, we could maybe develop a little our definition and define godliness as devotion to God in the person of Jesus Christ, which finds expression in a life that is Christ-like and so necessarily a God-pleasing.

Now, this definition begins to sound, I hope you agree, quite similar to what we were considering this morning. We noticed how Paul was focused on one thing, he had one goal, and this was to know Christ, which involved being like Christ.

Now, if this was Paul's one goal for his own life, we can reasonably conclude that it would have been his one goal for Timothy's life, indeed for any believer.

And so, it's not conceivable that for Timothy, Paul would propose a different one thing. No, Timothy's central concern must likewise be to know Christ.

[16 : 26] But on this occasion, when Paul addresses him and instructs him and exhorts him, the same goal, to all intents and purposes, is described in a different way.

To be godly. To be godly. Involves devotion to Christ and becoming like Christ. The very thing that Paul, in the passage we were considering this morning, described as the one thing that he sought to do.

So then, a godly man, a godly person, is one who is devoted to Christ and whose great desire is to become ever more like Christ. Now, in the light of that attempt at a definition, again, I would pose the question that I posed at the beginning.

Is that something you would like to be? Would you like to be a godly woman? Is it your desire to be a godly man? Well, maybe as you continue to ponder on that, let's move on and think of the next aspect of this that Paul addresses in the text, and that is the value of godliness.

What value does it hold? The verse speaks. Indeed, that is the verse's primary concern to address this matter of the value of godliness.

[17 : 49] And Paul does this by means of a comparison. The comparison is with physical training. At the end of verse 7, he exhorts Timothy, train yourself to be godly, and then in order to illustrate to Timothy the great value of godliness, he introduces this comparison for physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things.

And then he goes on to say something else. So the comparison is with physical training, which Paul recognizes is of some volume. And that is contrary to the somewhat, and that's being rather generous, the somewhat misleading translation that maybe many of us are familiar with in the authorized version where it speaks of physical exercise as profiting little.

The idea that that would suggest is it's really of no value or not something we should give any thought to. But that's not what Paul's saying. Paul's saying that physical training is of some volume. It's of some volume.

It's a good thing. But in comparison to training for godliness, it falls far short of that. It's a good thing. But training for godliness is of far greater value.

This is the logic. From the lesser to the greater, from something that is good to something that is much greater and much better. But it's not simply, and the language Paul uses, and we'll notice this in a moment, it's not simply that Paul is saying that godliness is of greater volume to the benefits of physical training, but he actually speaks of godliness as being of unlimited volume.

[19 : 28] So really if we're talking about a comparison that is being employed here by Paul, the comparison more precisely is not simply between the lesser and the greater, but between the limited and the unlimited.

So physical training is of limited volume. It's of some volume, but it's of limited volume. Whereas training for godliness is of unlimited volume. Which I think you agree isn't exactly the same as the comparison between the lesser and the greater.

There's a connection, but it's not exactly the same. To suggest that the comparison here is a slightly different one. Between that which is of limited value to that which is of unlimited volume.

Well, why do I say that? Well, it's because of the language that Paul uses to describe the value of training for godliness, or indeed the value of godliness itself. What is it that Paul says?

Well, he says there in verse 8, for physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things. Has value for all things. Before moving on to what he immediately goes on to say, just to pause for a moment at that point.

[20 : 32] Godliness has value for all things. And we do have to appreciate the weight of this term, all things. Paul really does mean for all things.

Anything you can imagine, anything you can conceive of, godliness is valuable for that. The all things is the same all things that Paul uses when he addresses or pens his letter to the Romans. And he speaks of how all things work together for good to those who love the Lord. And we quite rightly recognize that the all things there really is all things.

Good things and bad things, painful things and happy things, all things work together for good. Well, here too, Paul is saying that godliness is of value for all things. There's no human activity, no human endeavor, no situation, no relationship that we're involved in for which godliness is not of value.

There's no conceivable circumstance where it could be demonstrated that godliness serves no useful purpose. Godliness is always a good and a valuable and a worthwhile thing.

[21 : 43] I'm reminded, this isn't something that I thought of saying, but it just comes to my mind, the picture, a mental image I have of a bank manager, of all things, in Moyabamba, who was climbing a hill that there is outside of Moyabamba.

He was the manager of the bank, he was a relatively wealthy man, certainly in the context of that community. And the story is told, I wasn't present, it was a friend who told me, but he told me, jokingly, what had happened, that this man, he was climbing up this hill and it was quite a steep climb and he was exhausted and he still had some way to go.

And in his exhaustion and in his frustration at having so much difficulty in reaching the summit, he pulled out his wallet and he, I'll just do that just to make it a bit more dramatic, he pulled out his wallet and he said, what value is this to me here?

And he threw it to the ground. You know, all his money was of no value to him in getting to the top of that hill. You know, in other contexts, his money was of great worth and of great value. I should stress that this is a completely empty wallet, but that's another matter.

There is some plastic which I suppose would serve some purpose. But what Paul is saying is that there's no situation where for a believer it is not a worthwhile and a valuable thing to be godly.

[22 : 59] If you are godly, you will be a better husband, a better wife. You will be a better son or daughter. You will be better in the work that you do. Godliness is of value, of practical, worthwhile value to you in any and every conceivable circumstance.

It is of value for all things. It's always a valuable thing to be godly, to be devoted to Christ, to be like Christ.

Now, it is true and we have to move on swiftly to notice how Paul goes on to, in a very particular way, illustrate the value of godliness for all things in what he goes on to say.

He says that for physical training there's some value, but godliness has value for all things. And then he says holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. And, you know, when he says holding promise for the present life and the life to come, that's not a completely separate statement to what he's just said about it being of value for all things.

I think Paul's train of thought is to say it's of value for all things and I'll explain that by illustrating it's of value for this life and for the life to come.

[24 : 11] But let's think a little bit about that particular statement of Paul's. Godliness, he says, holds promise for both the present life and the life to come.

Or maybe to put another way for this language of holding promise, what does that mean? Well, maybe we could put it this way. The promises of God, the promises he speaks of are God's promises, the promises of God associated with godly, associated with a believer becoming godly, are to be realized, they're to be fulfilled, they will be experienced in this life and in the life to come.

The one, to illustrate that, the one who is described in the previous chapter as the mystery of godliness, or any case, having used this rather intriguing phrase, he goes on to describe Jesus.

This is the one who promises believers, his disciples, he promises us life in all its fullness. That's a promise that he makes to us. And that's a promise for the here and now.

And in the measure that we are devoted to Christ and become like Christ, in the measure that we are godly, in that measure, we will discover that that promise is true, that it will be fulfilled, that it will be delivered on by God.

[25 : 29] His promises concerning the value of godliness we will experience to be faithful promises in this life. Maybe if we reflect back on this morning's text, the godly will enjoy the power of the resurrection in the here and now.

The godly will know what it is to experience the privilege of sharing in the sufferings of Christ, and indeed of becoming more and more like Christ in this life. But also, of course, Paul stresses that the godly life holds promise for the life to come, when we shall be made perfect.

Again, harking back, as it were, to the text that we were thinking about this morning. So, having touched on, perhaps quite briefly and certainly inadequately, on this matter of the value of godliness, again, I pose you the question, would you like to be a godly man?

Would it be your desire to be a godly woman? Which takes us to the final thing that we want to consider, and that is, well, how can we become godly?

And in this text, Paul identifies one very specific activity that is required. In order for us to be godly, we must dedicate ourselves to training to be godly.

[26 : 54] Some might understand the phrase there in verse 7, training in godliness. It's a slightly different idea to the idea of training to become godly, though not mutually exclusive.

The point is that there is training that is required. Again, as we return to the Olympic theme, there are no shortcuts to Olympic gold medals.

If Hannah Miley, I was, even as I'm going to say it, and even though I've got it written down in front of me, I'm still harking back to the occasion. Some of you weren't here, but when I use the name of some teen pop star instead of her proper name.

So it's kind of like I've got this idea that I'm going to do it again. But Hannah Miley, I'm sure that is her name, if she were to give up on her training, even at this late stage with a few months to go before the Olympics, if she were to give up on her training, we know what would happen. She would have no prospect of gaining the gold medal that she aspires to. She would fail miserably. It would be embarrassing if she were to present herself.

[28 : 01] Maybe she's made the qualifying time already, I don't know. But if she abandoned her training and sought to compete, it would be embarrassing. Training is essential.

And similarly, there are no shortcuts to godliness. I think this is what Paul is reminding Timothy of. You are to be a godly man, but there are no shortcuts to godliness. It's almost as if he's saying to Timothy, don't think that godliness is some kind of mystical thing that you'll inherit.

Or it's something that you gain simply because of the years that you have in the faith. And, well, eventually it will come to you. No, there are no shortcuts to becoming a godly believer.

Without training, godliness will prove elusive and unreachable. There are many here this evening gifted and active Christians.

But I wonder, and it's not for me to come to a conclusion, but I wonder, is it the case that it is a much smaller number who, in God's estimation, could be defined or described as godly Christians?

[29 : 07] And if that is so, why is that so? Well, the answer surely is before us that we fail to train to be godly, or in any case, our training is deficient.

And I want us just to consider as we come to a close, as we draw things to a close, I want us to just briefly consider three essential elements for a successful training regime that will have, as its outcome, a godly life.

Now, this image that Paul uses of training, it can be developed in so many ways, but we have to be careful in not just taking it too far, if for no other reason than for reasons of time.

So I want to suggest three elements that we can identify as being necessary in a training regime that has as its purpose that we become godly, men and women.

You might call it the 3D regime, for no other reason that the three words I'm going to use all begin with the letter D. The first thing is dedication. Training that cuts the mustard must be dedicated training.

[30 : 16] And this is a common characteristic of successful athletes, a shared dedication to the goal at hand. We think of the British prospects for the Olympics, probably one of our brightest prospects, certainly in track and field, would be Mo Farah.

And where did Mo Farah spend Christmas and New Year? Well, I believe he was at the, what was it, the sports personality of the year and he was being interviewed. He was off to Kenya. He wasn't going to be with his family enjoying Christmas and a Christmas dinner or a New Year.

No, he was off to altitude training in Kenya. Why? Because of his dedication to what he is seeking to achieve. He's willing to do that. And so, the application is so obvious that maybe it doesn't need laboring.

But do we have the dedication required to train as we must to become godliness? It's not dedication really to a cause, not even dedication to a prize, but dedication to the person of Jesus Christ.

But even dedication, genuine dedication in itself is not sufficient. Dedication must be accompanied or must be evidenced or must take concrete form, I suppose, in discipline.

[31 : 33] That's not actually my second D. That's a kind of subset D of the first D. That's part of dedication. Discipline. Indeed, in writing to the Corinthians, Paul also speaks of training.

We've read that passage and there, interestingly, he adds an adjective. He speaks of strict training. Strict training. And we all know the score with dedicated athletes.

They rise at dawn and follow a strict regime of training, not only in terms of their physical exertion, even in terms of their diet and a whole host of other aspects of their training and development to be all that they wish to be.

And, of course, we know that in that they forego many legitimate pleasures in order to achieve their goal. And, again, the point doesn't need to be labored.

In what measure are we prepared to forego legitimate pleasures in order that we might dedicate the time that is required that we would train to be a godly?

[32 : 34] So, dedication. One essential element. A second element would be direction. Successful training requires the direction of a skilled coach.

Of course, with modern athletes, there's this whole team who surround them often. Maybe some of you will have heard how Andy Murray has finally managed to identify a coach.

He's been without a coach for several months. And such was the importance of identifying the right man that he spent considerable time. And, apparently, he's opted for Ivan Lendl.

Those of you of my age and above will remember Ivan Lendl and his classic encounters with John McEnroe, the winner of several majors back in the 80s, I suppose. Well, we'll see if Ivan Lendl is able to take Andy Murray to the next level of victory in one of the majors.

Well, as Christians, we also need direction in the training that we must undergo. We need someone who will coach us, who will direct us. And we are provided with that one who will coach us, will direct us in none other than the very Holy Spirit of God.

[33 : 49] The Holy Spirit of God is granted to us to direct us in and through God's Word as we would train to be godly. So, dedication and direction.

But the final thing, and I use it, I mention it at the end, really more for effect than because it's the obvious place for it, because really the obvious place for this final element would be at the beginning.

But the final element I mention is desire. Desire is, it seems to me, fundamental if we are to train to be godly.

It is from desire that will surge dedication. It is desire that will enable us to buckle under the regime and the direction of the one who would guide us in that way.

You really have to want to be godly, to put it very simply. In the absence of the desire, the training will become a grinding exercise in legalism, grounded on the inadequate foundation of duty.

[34 : 59] Now, don't get me wrong, a sense of duty is important. In the Christian life, it is important that there be a sense of duty of doing that which we ought to do.

I'm not for a moment suggesting that isn't important. But in the absence of desire, duty proves inadequate when we have to submit ourselves to a strict regime of training to be godly.

Duty simply won't be sufficient. There must be desire. I'm sure it's true of those who are preparing for the Olympics that at the very heart of their motivation is a desire to do what they do and to win that prize.

Even, again, as we return to sporting illustrations, we've often heard a commentator when there's been some sporting encounter and maybe an unlikely victory.

And the explanation given is that he wanted it more. You know, the boxer who was the underdog, but he wanted it more. Or the smaller team, you know, in some giant killing act.

[36 : 06] And what's the reason it is given? They wanted it more. You see, there was the desire and the desire that drove them to achieve what seemed so unlikely. And in this matter of godliness, desire, I think, is so important.

Hence, the question that I've been posing throughout this evening. Do you want to be godly? Is that something that you desire? And so I close with that same question.

Is this something you want? Do you want to know Christ? Do you want to experience the power of His resurrection? Is this something that you want? And I say this to you, as I say it to myself, if you want it enough, then you will become a godly man.

You will. If you want it enough, you will become. Everything is laid out for you. The means are available. What you need to do in order to achieve it is available to you as it was to Timothy.

But do you want it enough? That's something I'd like to leave you with, to think with and ponder on.

And with that, let's close with a word of prayer. To come to you, because you want it enough to give you that you want it enough to happen.