

# Sermon: Spiritual Exercises to Make You Strong

## 1 Thessalonians 5:16-22

*Daniel L. Akin*

**Daniel L. Akin** is Vice President and Dean and Professor of Preaching at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Akin has served as dean since 1996 and has also served on the faculty of Southeastern Seminary and Criswell College. He has an extensive speaking ministry, especially on the topic of marriage and family, and is the author of the forthcoming commentary on 1-3 John in the New American Commentary series.

### Introduction

The human body is a remarkable creation of God (Ps 139:13-15). It consists of more than fifty trillion cells and its weight is about sixty percent water. It manufactures three hundred million new blood cells every day and it has a heart that beats seventy to eighty times per minute or one hundred thousand times every day. Over seventy years it pumps four hundred million liters of blood. The average adult breathes six to seven liters of air per minute (picture in your mind the liter diet Coke bottle), which is about ten thousand liters per day and 3,650,000 liters per year. Other interesting facts include:

There are about one hundred billion neurons (nerve cells) in the brain. We are born with twelve billion neurons that do not regenerate when they die. There are one hundred thousand miles of blood vessels in an adult—enough to circle the earth four times. The average human eye blinks about twenty thousand times every day. The human kidney filters seventeen hundred liters of blood every twenty-four hours. There is enough carbon in your body to fill nine hundred pencils. There are about seventy-five thousand hairs on your head. The strongest muscle in your body is the tongue!

Essential to the health and well being of this gift from God are three important factors: 1) rest, 2) diet, and 3) exercise. I am especially interested in exercise. A quick survey of any basic text on anatomy

or even a visit to your local encyclopedia yields some amazing discoveries about exercise and fitness. Did you know that for your body to be healthy and fine-tuned it needs 1) strength fitness, 2) endurance fitness, 3) anaerobic fitness, 4) speed fitness, 5) orthostatic fitness, and even 6) relaxation fitness? All of these are crucial to a healthy, fit and productive body. “The human body, like any living organism, must be used or it will lose its structure and function.”<sup>1</sup> As the saying goes, “If you don’t use it, you lose it.”

What is true about physical life is also true about spiritual life. Our inner person, our spiritual being requires attention and exercise if it is going to be healthy and productive. To be fit and ready for service, trained and fine-tuned for efficient ministry, we must engage in spiritual exercise. There are certain disciplines we must adopt as our very own.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:16-22 the apostle Paul directs our attention to eight spiritual exercises that will make us strong for the Lord. In short yet powerful commands, we are challenged to live our lives in a very specific and intentional manner that will conform to the will of God (v. 18). Each of these eight exercises is in the form of an imperative. God is not asking us to consider these principles for possible adoption and implementation. On the contrary, it is His will that these activities become a vital part of who we are.

It is also interesting to note that the

verbs in each verse are in the present tense, calling for continuous action. Further, an adverbial modifier stands before the verb in each command. This placement puts an emphasis on these modifiers. Verses 16-18 give particular attention to the inner life of the believer, while verses 19-22 focus more on the life of the Church as it gathers for corporate worship.<sup>2</sup> Inwardly and outwardly, individually and corporately, Paul provides us potent exercises to enable us to be spiritually strong for the Lord.

### **Spiritual exercises**

#### ***Rejoice consistently 5:16***

The first challenge we receive is to rejoice constantly. Paul addresses the subject of joy over two dozen times in his letters. It is the dominant theme of Philipians where he tells us: "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say rejoice" (4:4). In 2 Corinthians 6:10 he teaches that there is no contradiction in rejoicing when we sorrow. Nehemiah 8:10 reminds us that "the joy of the Lord is your strength." Joy is a mark of one who has experienced God's transforming grace through Jesus Christ.

The word "always" is a favorite of Paul's in 1 Thessalonians. He uses it four other times (1:2; 2:16; 3:6; 4:17). It means "on every occasion" or "in every set of circumstances." Joy is not the same as happiness. Joy is not based on the situation in which we find ourselves. Some situations are bad and painful. They hurt. Joy is based, rather, on the fact that we are in Christ and what we are experiencing is the will of God for us (v. 18). We can experience joy even when we sorrow. On July 23-24, 1999 I participated in a men's retreat at the beautiful Estes Park outside of Denver, Colorado. Much of our time was spent learning how to be better hus-

bands and fathers. One gentleman, after our Saturday morning session, told me that his family had become even more precious to him in recent years because he had lost a son to kidney disease a number of years earlier. The son was only twenty-seven. Tears welled up in his eyes as he talked, but a gentle smile was also on his face as we reflected on the fact that this son, who had trusted Christ as Savior and Lord, no longer experienced the pain and severe limitations his disease had brought. For him Philipians 1:21 especially rang true, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." There was sorrow, but there was also joy.

Because we belong to Christ and He is working his purpose in and through us, we can possess genuine joy. We can be spiritually magnetic and infectious. We can bless rather than curse, encourage and not disappoint, give hope rather than despair.

In life and especially in ministry, we must exercise our "joy muscles." As they grow strong we develop an optimistic outlook, a sense of humor, a winsome spirit. There is a smile rather than a frown. People leave our presence more encouraged than when they first arrived.

#### ***Pray unceasingly 5:17***

There is an intimate connection between verses 16 and 17, for unceasing prayer will almost always produce a joyful heart. A heart full of joy is the result of a heart free of burdens, and a heart free of burdens is a heart comforted by prayer. John Calvin said, "by prayer we disburden our anxieties, as it were, into his bosom."<sup>3</sup>

Due to a misunderstanding, however, this verse is often a source of discouragement rather than encouragement. Some people read the verse and conclude that

God somehow expects them to be in prayer twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Prayer, by some miraculous means, is to be a moment-by-moment and second-by-second occupation. Of course this is impossible, and it misses the intent of the text.

The verse challenges us to be constant and consistent in our prayer life. Prayer is to be a regular habit, a close companion. Prayer can be understood essentially as a “breathing exercise.” When we inhale, we listen to the voice of God in His Word through the Holy Spirit’s illumination. As we exhale, we speak back to the Lord sharing our heart, telling Him what is on our mind.

The word for prayer “is a general one that implies a worshipful approach to God.”<sup>4</sup> It encompasses all types of prayer. As we try and establish a good foundation in these basic exercises, I believe we should focus on two particular aspects of this exercise and in this order: praise and petition. We should regularly come into the presence of our Lord praising Him, honoring Him, adoring Him for who He is and all that He has done. We praise him for His person and work. We acknowledge that He alone is God and that He alone is worthy to be praised. Then, we can approach Him who is Father asking for what we need and interceding on behalf of others.

No one has addressed the urgency of prayer with greater passion than Andrew Murray. In his classic *The Ministry of Intercession*, he reminds us, “Christ actually meant prayer to be the great power by which His Church should do its work, the neglect of prayer is the great reason the Church has not greater power over the masses in Christian and in heathen countries.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore,

Let us take time to seriously consider this need. Each Christless soul will go down to utter darkness, perishing from hunger, even though there is bread to spare. Unknown millions of souls are dying without the knowledge of Christ. Christians all around us are living a sickly, feeble and fruitless spiritual life. Surely there is a need for prayer. Nothing but prayer to God for help will avail.<sup>6</sup>

Prayer is that incredible conversation which connects earth to heaven and man to God. I do not understand all of its mysteries and how it is that the prayers of finite humans can move an infinite and sovereign God. Many believe a prayer revival is sweeping our land. Recently the \$5.5 million World Prayer Center was opened in Colorado Springs for the purpose of praying for world evangelization. Today there are public prayer marches, prayer walks, on-site prayer and what has been called, “saturation prayer.”

In November 1998 more than three million people participated in Campus Crusade’s Three Day Prayer and Fasting Conference. Some believe we can identify quantifiable results of prayer. In Washington, D.C., 237 churches have come together to pray and crime has reportedly dropped seventeen percent.<sup>7</sup>

I admit that I am not sure what to make of all of this. What I do know is that God says pray, and when I pray I become stronger spiritually. I am blessed and God is pleased. I am convinced that prayer will be your hardest exercise. Scripture teaches this and my own experience confirms it. Why? Perhaps it is because we fail to appreciate or understand the incredible privilege we have. Andrew Murray rightly says, “Throughout Scripture, in the life of every saint, of God’s own Son, throughout the history of God’s Church, God is, first of all, a prayer hear-

ing God.”<sup>8</sup> If He is always listening, and He is, then we should always be praying.

### ***Give thanks comprehensively 5:18***

Here is perhaps one of the most difficult commands in the Bible to obey. The demand seems absurd. There must be a mistake. And yet, there it is: “in *everything* give thanks. . . .” However, this is one place in Scripture where we dare not stop too quickly. We must take the verse in all of its fullness. As Paul Harvey is fond to say, we must read “the rest of the story.” And just what do we discover? “This *is* the will of God *in* Christ Jesus for you.” Now the key is turned. Now the mist begins to lift. Now my sight begins to clear. Note we are to give thanks *in* all things not *for* all things. Say thank you that my mother died? Say thank you that my parents are getting a divorce? Say thank you for the terrible accident that left my brother in a coma with a battered and broken body? No! This is not what it says. It says, “Give thanks *in*. . . .” Call to your aid the perspective of Romans 8:28. Leon Morris puts it well,

. . . when a man comes to see that God in Christ has saved him, everything is altered. He now realizes that God’s purpose is being worked out. He sees the evidence in his own life and in the lives of those about him. This leads to the thought that the same loving purpose is being worked out even in those events which he is inclined not to welcome at all. When he comes to see God’s hand in all things he learns to give thanks for all things. Tribulation is unpleasant. Yet who in the midst of tribulation would not give thanks when he knows that the Father who loves him so greatly has permitted that tribulation only in order that His wise and merciful purpose might be worked out?<sup>9</sup>

Calvin adds:

For what is fitter or more suitable for pacifying us, than when we learn that God embraces us in Christ so tenderly, that he turns to our advantage and welfare everything that befalls us? . . . this is a special remedy for correcting our impatience—to turn away our eyes from beholding present evils that torment us, and to direct our views to a consideration of a different nature—how God stands affected toward us in Christ.<sup>10</sup>

For a lost person to say “thank you” for everything is foolish. For the child of God to say “thank you” in everything is faith.

### ***Desire the Spirit fervently 5:19***

This verse is translated, “Do not quench the Spirit.” The word quench means “to put out.” This is the only place in the NT where the word is used in metaphorically. A believer cannot lose the Spirit (Eph 1:13-14), but he can grieve Him (Eph 4:30) and quench Him. In this verse it is the work, and not the person, of the Spirit that is in view. To quench the Spirit is to extinguish, stifle, restrain, or stop His work in our lives.

Since its beginning, the church has struggled to “get it right” when it comes to the ministry of the Holy Spirit. A. T. Robertson lamented in his time, “Today there are two extremes about spiritual gifts (cold indifference or wild excess).”<sup>11</sup> Warren Wiersbe warns us, “The fire of the Spirit must not go out on the altar of our hearts.”<sup>12</sup> The Spirit is a gift of God’s grace received at salvation. We are now His temple (1 Cor. 6:19-20). James 4:5 teaches that “The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously.” In passionate response, we should long for Him, desiring His full and unhindered activity in our lives.

### *Honor preaching properly 5:20*

One way we may quench the Spirit is by despising the preaching of the word. “Do not hold in contempt these utterances” is how B. H. Carroll, first president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, renders this verse. Apparently preaching suffered from the same thing in the first century as it does today: a lack of respect. What was the problem we ask? False prophecies? Unimpressive preaching? The gift was not spectacular enough? It was too spectacular? We do not know for sure. What we do know is that the preaching of the word is “the power of God” (1 Cor 1:18), it convinces and it convicts (1 Cor 14:24), it is that which comes “in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance” (1 Thess 1:5). Calvin paints a realistic picture from his own day when he writes, “Many feel disgusted with the very name of preaching, as there are so many foolish and ignorant persons that from the pulpit blab out their worthless contrivances.”<sup>13</sup> However, he goes on to add: “But the Lord declares in this place by the mouth of Paul, that the course of doctrine ought not, by any faults of mankind, or by any rashness, or ignorance, or, in fine, by any abuse to be hindered from being always in a vigorous state in the Church.”<sup>14</sup>

Preaching continues to be assaulted in our day. Sometimes the attack comes even from within the evangelical camp. Exposition has especially been the target of many modern ministers who believe we must tell it the world’s way if we want the world to hear. Calvin Miller of the Beeson Divinity School is a major advocate and evangelist for narrative preaching over against exposition. He says, “Since we are a story-soaked culture, to preach in any other way is just not going

to attract people.”<sup>15</sup> According to *The Futurist*, the most valued workers in the new century will be storytellers. Any professional – advertiser, teacher, politician, entrepreneur, athlete, or minister – will be valued for the ability to come up with stories that captivate an audience.<sup>16</sup>

May I suggest a couple of principles to follow, which will acknowledge the element of truth in the narrative approach but will not embrace its error? First, it is a sin to make the Bible boring. Paige Patterson is correct when he says, “The criticisms I hear about expository preaching are, in reality, criticisms about ‘boring preaching.’ The greatest preaching in the earth is still captivating, prophetic, invigorating, Christ-honoring exposition.”<sup>17</sup> Secondly, when the Bible tells a story then you tell the story. When it teaches doctrine, then you teach doctrine. Be true to the text and show your congregation what a great God we worship. Preach with passion, zeal and energy. Honor Paul’s admonition to “Preach the word” (2 Tim 4:2).

### *Live life wisely 5:21*

We are not to despise preaching, prophecy, the proclamation of God’s word by His prophets. However, a question naturally arises: Does anything go? Are we to open the door with eyes wide shut exercising no discrimination whatsoever? B. H. Carroll reminds us, “There are some spirits that are from God. There is an inspiration that come not from God. There is devil inspiration.”<sup>18</sup> Calvin says, “Keep the middle path . . . examination or discrimination ought to precede rejection, so it must, also, precede the reception of true and sound doctrines. . . . Sometimes good and pious teachers fail to hit the mark.”<sup>19</sup>

The word test means “prove or examine.” The New English Bible says, “try to



determine the genuineness.” And note the qualifying phrase: “All things.” Vigilance in guarding “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3) is an ever necessary posture. We can never relax our guard or let down our defenses. The history of our own Southern Baptist denomination teaches us how quickly the truth can be lost.

Dr. Jerry Vines has written a fine book entitled *Spirit Works*. It examines the theology and practice of the modern charismatic movement in the light of Scripture. In that book, Dr. Vines provides a number of tests to discern the genuineness of certain spiritual activities.<sup>20</sup> I would like to follow his lead and submit a four-fold test that can assist us in this crucial exercise of living wisely. It is not infallible, but I believe it is extremely helpful.

1. The Saviour Test (cf. 1 John 4:1-3): Does it properly honor and exalt the person and work of Jesus?

2. The Scripture Test: Is this teaching consistent with the whole Bible’s instruction and doctrine in this area? Does this teaching attempt to take away or add to God’s Word?

3. The Spirit Test: Is this teaching in concert with the expressed desires and ministry of the Holy Spirit as revealed in the Word? (Check especially against John 14-16).

4. The Saints Test: What have and what do other mature and godly students of Scripture say on this matter? (cf. 1 Cor 14:31-33).

### ***Keep the good zealously 5:21***

This command is clearly related to what precedes it. Once we have put all things to the test, we are to continually hold fast what is good. Paul is telling us to cling to and never let go of that which

is good. The immediate object of this exercise is prophetic utterances. Some interpreters believe it is legitimate to extend the principle only to all spiritual gifts and activities. I believe, however, that Paul placed no restriction on this command. Verse 22 indicates that he set forth this exercise as a general rule of life to be applied to all things. When you discover any good thing from God, guard it and keep it.

However, the danger is not so much that you will let it go, as it is that you will let it slip away. In Song of Solomon 2:15 we are warned about the “little foxes” that can sneak into the vineyard and spoil the vines. Solomon is warning us about the little things that can wound our marriage, and all the while we don’t even notice. The good things of a Christian marriage and family are not to be held lightly or flippantly held. “Hold fast,” hold tight, and never let go of those good things you have from God.

### ***Abstain from evil completely 5:22***

Abstain is a strong word. Paul used it in 4:3 when he told the Thessalonians to stay away from sexual immorality. The force of this verb is further strengthened by Paul’s use of a preposition that emphasizes separation and his placing of that preposition first in the text. Literally he writes, “From every form of evil abstain.”

The word “form” is an interesting one. Hiebert points out that while the term “can mean outward appearances, it can also mean, ‘sort, kind, species.’”<sup>21</sup> Most likely, Paul means every kind of evil rather than just every outward appearance of evil.

Evil does come at us in all sorts of sizes, shapes and forms. It is a complex enemy. While it never changes in its essence, it continually seeks new and enticing forms,

tailor made just right for each one of us. Evil knows you from your shoe size to your hat size. It regularly sizes you up that it might catch you off guard and knock you out. To withstand its perpetual assault and deception requires perpetual readiness and preparation.

What is an especially attractive form of evil to you may not be an attractive form of evil to me. Where I am weak, you may be strong. Where I am strong, you may be weak. However, we all have weaknesses, we all have areas of vulnerability. It is especially in those areas (perhaps it is the eyes, the mouth, the hands, the mind, the heart, or the will) that you must daily avail yourself of the essential exercise to “abstain from evil completely.”

Edmund Burke said,

The instances are exceedingly rare of men immediately passing over a clearly marked line from virtue into declared vice and corruption. There are middle tints and shades between the two extremes; there is something uncertain on the confines of the two empires which they must pass through, and which renders the change easy and imperceptible.<sup>22</sup>

### Conclusion

Samuel Smiles said,

Sow a thought, and you reap an act.  
Sow an act, and you reap a habit.  
Sow a habit, and you reap a character.  
Sow a character, and you reap a destiny.

It is my prayer that all of us will so think on these exercises that they truly become actions we practice daily. And as we practice them daily, I believe they will become habits of life, as much a part of us as the water we drink, the food we eat, and the air we breathe. And as they become habits, they will shape our char-

acter. And as they shape our character, they will indeed shape our destiny as those who have lived strong for the Lord over the course of a lifetime. It is not enough to start well. It is imperative that we finish well. Strong for Jesus now! Strong for Jesus until the very end.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. “Exercise and Physical Fitness,” 29.

<sup>2</sup> Edmond D. Hiebert, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992) 275.

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries* Vol. XXI, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, I & II Thess., I & II Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, trans. Rev. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society; rep., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989) 296; cf. 1 Pet 5:7.

<sup>4</sup> D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians* (New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995) 181.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Murray, *The Ministry of Intercession; A Plea for More Prayer* (New York: Revell, 1898) 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.

<sup>7</sup> Eddie Smith, “The Invisible Power of Prayer,” *Charisma* 24 (May 1999) 46-51.

<sup>8</sup> Murray, 11.

<sup>9</sup> Leon Morris, *First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, rev. ed. (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 173-174.

<sup>10</sup> Calvin, 297.

<sup>11</sup> A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1931) 4:37.

<sup>12</sup> Warren Wiersbe, *Be Ready: 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1981) 118.

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, 300.

<sup>14</sup>Calvin, 301.

<sup>15</sup>Interview with *Net Fax*, 2-15-99, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup>Rolf Jensen, "The Dream Society," *The Futurist* 310 (May-June 1996) 9.

<sup>17</sup>Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999) 1.

<sup>18</sup>B. H. Carroll, *An Interpretation of the English Bible, Vol 10: James, I and II Thessalonians and I and II Corinthians* (New York: Revell, 1916) 90.

<sup>19</sup>Calvin, 300-301.

<sup>20</sup>Jerry Vines, *Spiritworks: Contemporary Views on the Gifts of the Spirit and the Bible* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999).

<sup>21</sup>Hiebert, 266.

<sup>22</sup>Quoted in *Uplook*, Nov. 1998, p. 3.