

Discipline, Provisioning and Flexibility

by T. Austin-Sparks

Discipline is essential for the Christian life, and it is crucial to be concerned about spiritual food and provision in order to endure in the spiritual battle.

Scripture: 2 Timothy 2:3

Topics: "Discipline", "Spiritual Provisioning", "Flexibility"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the critical importance of discipline, provisioning, and flexibility in the Christian life, likening it to a soldier's preparation for battle. He explains that discipline is essential for behavior, health, selflessness, perseverance, and service, urging believers to maintain a disciplined life that reflects their faith even in private. Provisioning is highlighted as vital for spiritual endurance, stressing the need for adequate spiritual nourishment to withstand life's challenges. Lastly, Sparks discusses the necessity of flexibility in faith, encouraging believers to remain open to God's leading while holding firm to foundational truths. The sermon calls for a balanced approach to steadfastness and adaptability in the ongoing spiritual warfare.

Transcript

"Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier on service entangleth himself in the affairs of this life; that he may please him who enrolled him as a soldier" (2 Timothy 2:3,4).

(A) Discipline

In these well known words of Paul, we are introduced to the most important matter of discipline. What is discipline? It could be described as the steadying effect, the girding power, of purposefulness, as opposed to looseness and carelessness and slackness. It is what the Apostle Peter calls "girding up the loins of your mind" (1 Pet. 1:13). Now, in that great South East Asia Campaign to which we have been referring, discipline had, naturally, a very large place. We will consider it in its connection with five different, though related, things.

(1) As To Behaviour

In the first place, discipline is related to behaviour. I am not quoting from the volume, but there is a great deal said about this matter of behaviour. It is so easy to accept the subtle idea that, when you are on a war footing (especially under conditions such as obtained in that campaign), discipline does not matter so

much: you can throw off the restraints of the parade ground and need not bother about the strict rules and regulations of training; you are free from all that and can just plunge straight into the battle. But the writer of this book makes much of the importance of bringing into the battle all those rules of training and discipline and behaviour. And you will at once see that our behaviour as the Lord's people is a most vital factor in the campaign. The New Testament, as we know, has a great deal to say about Christian behaviour, and it is not without very real purpose that the Lord makes such large mention of it in His inspired volume. He knows the importance of our conduct, our demeanour--of how we behave. With Him it is a vital part of the battle. It matters; it makes a great deal of difference. We are not to be slack, loose, careless, in our way and manner of life. The enemy makes great gain out of that sort of thing; it puts a most effective weapon into his hand against the Lord's interests, against the whole object to which we are called.

You and I, as Christians, have got to watch our behaviour: not only before the world, but--as we shall emphasize again presently--even in secret. It matters whether we are disciplined in the matter of behaviour. The great point that this book makes of behaviour is that discipline should have become second nature: it should not merely be something put on for the occasion, when it is expected and when eyes are on us, when we are more or less on parade before the officers. We should not need to be told or pulled up. Disciplined behaviour should become second nature; it should just be us--we are that. Our behaviour should betoken what we are.

A simple point is made by the Supreme Command in that connection. Soldiers, when they are on the parade ground or in training, are, of course, very careful about their saluting of officers; it is a part of their discipline. But it was noticed that, when they were all mixed up in battle conditions, officers and men together under actual war conditions, they became very slack, very careless and loose, in this seemingly small matter. And the Supreme Command said: This is something that shows whether men are really trained men or not; it gives them away. If they were really disciplined men, the conditions under which they live would make no difference at all: they would carry out the rules and regulations of their training under all circumstances, for it would have become second nature. They would salute an officer just as much in those active service conditions, even in jungle warfare, as they would on the parade ground or in training.

This illustration should impress upon us the importance of realizing that discipline is not just something artificial, something that we assume; it is not just the behaviour that we put on when we are being watched and when it is expected of us. It is how we behave when we are caught off our guard that reveals what we are. While that may sound very simple and elementary, it is a very important thing in the Christian life. The discipline of the Holy Spirit in our lives will show itself under all conditions: we act so, because we are that--that is what we are. When we are in public, where we know that it matters what people think of us, we can put on mannerisms, assume an artificial voice, pose, effect. But when we are with a few, for whom we have not a great deal of respect, we can put off the guise and really show our true nature. This is fatal to reality!

(2) As To Care For Health

Then there was the matter of discipline in regard to health. It was of the utmost importance that every care and precaution related to health should be most carefully, most meticulously observed. But terrible havoc was wrought in that campaign by disease; many thousands of men were lost to the fighting forces through carelessness in the matter of health.

How much more urgent, then, is care of health in the spiritual realm! It is very important that you and I should be disciplined in the matter of spiritual health. In Latin, the word for 'health' is cognate with our word 'salvation'; and salvation connotes 'preservation', 'deliverance'. Discipline in spiritual health means to be alive to the perils to spiritual life, the threatening inroads to the spiritual condition. Very much could be said on the matter of spiritual maladies, spiritual diseases, spiritual infirmities. Many of them overcome us because we are not disciplined, we are not careful, we are not watchful; we are not alive to things that can undermine our spiritual health. It is of great importance for the battle that we should be spiritually healthy, be in good health and strength. This is something of which to take real account. The question on any given issue should be--not: Is it right or wrong? (in a permissive sense)--but: Will this unfit me for the battle? will this in any way weaken me in the great campaign in which I am engaged?

You see, it is fitness for the fight that matters, but the peril of carelessness over it is ever present. So, to the man to whom the Apostle says: "Suffer hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ", he will also say: "Lay hold on eternal life" (1 Tim. 6:12, A.V.). There are times when we are slack in this matter: we need life, and there is life available, but we do not lay hold of it as we should--we just let go. A disciplined Christian is one who will say in the time of threatening or actual weakness: 'This is the time for me to lay hold on life, not to give way, not to let go. If I let go, I shall be put out of the fight. I must put up my defenses against these things that would weaken; I must react to this situation; I must resist; I must lay hold on life.'

I can but hint at what I mean, but if you had read the terrible account of the decimation of the forces in this campaign by disease, through carelessness as to health, you would see that there is point in this. And we have an enemy who, in a spiritual sense, is constantly sending germs our way, with the object of putting us out; but there is such a thing as really laying hold on life, being strong to resist, and maintaining our spiritual strength by the grace of God.

(3) As To Selflessness

A further aspect of discipline relates to the need of being always alive to the fact that what we do or fail to do involves others. An illustration is given in this book of how that worked out in the case of one particular man (and maybe of others through his example), who was on sentry duty under war conditions. He was extremely, desperately tired, almost exhausted, and yet he had a very important point to guard. Many lives were involved in the matter of his alertness. So, having to stand on guard in one place, quietly and alone, for long hours of the night, what did he do? He put his rifle in front of him with the bayonet fixed, and he put his chin on the point of the bayonet, so that if he nodded--well, he knew what would happen. Because of others! That was something the Commander in chief took note of, that the man should do a thing like that because of his sense of responsibility. To have nodded, to have gone off to sleep at that moment, would maybe have given the enemy the advantage. We know what the New Testament says about Satan getting an advantage (2 Cor. 2:11).

But here again, the point of discipline is the realization that we do not live to ourselves or die to ourselves (Rom. 14:7); that in what we do we involve others. That has already been said in an earlier chapter; but let us hear the added emphasis as it comes up again in this connection. 'Now then, I must--or I must not--and not only because of myself. If it were only myself, well, what matter?' If it just began and ended with ourselves, we would sometimes perhaps let our lives go and our testimony go. But there is very much more in it. 'I dare not, I must not--or I must--because...'--because of others and because of the battle. Discipline calls for selflessness.

(4) As To Losing Heart

How great is the constant temptation, under the long-drawn out wear and tear of the campaign, to weaken, to lose heart, just to drop out, or to cease to be a positive factor. How often we have to pull ourselves up, do we not, under discouraging conditions, when we are inclined to feel it is not worth it, when inertia comes over us and we fall into a state of despondency and depression. That is the time when discipline is tested. The undisciplined just give way; the disciplined do not. Our reaction to the temptation to give up will be according to whether we have or have not been thoroughly disciplined. We are tested then; we are found out.

(5) As To Service

Finally, discipline is related to service. That was involved in what we said just now, but it is particularly so in regard to the spirit of service. In the book that we have been considering, it is made very much of that there should be a spirit of service. I think that spirit is leaving the world, is being very largely lost to the world to day. There are very few left who have a spirit of service--shall I say, of servanthood. But the Lord Jesus said: "I am in the midst of you as he that serveth" (Luke 22:27). "The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister" (Mark 10:45). It is not difficult to see the connection between service and discipline. Evidence of it is, indeed, provided by the association of the contrary conditions to these in the world today. The opposites go together: the loss of the spirit of service goes hand in hand with the loss of discipline.

The Lord's Concern For Discipline

Let us now bring this matter right over to our own lives as the Lord's people. It is very important for us to realize that the Lord Himself is most particular on this question of discipline. Perhaps we know it, in a way; perhaps we have come up against it; and yet maybe we have not given it much thought--we have not looked it straight in the eyes and recognized it. The Lord Himself is very particular about discipline. Whether we do or not, the Lord views everything from the standpoint of the war. He has filled the Bible with this matter of warfare. He Himself is declared to be "a man of war" (Ex. 15:3). The Lord knows that there is a war on, and He knows everything about it. We may think we know a little about it, but He has complete cognizance of the full extent and range of this spiritual war that is in progress. For it is a terrific conflict that is raging between these two great kingdoms and powers and systems. And so He views everything from the standpoint of the war, and deals with us on the basis of war conditions. He is therefore most particular about this matter of discipline.

Now, let your imagination rove over such a point of view, and at once you will see why the Lord is very strict with us. He would say to us, in effect: 'Do you not realize that you are in a great conflict? Do you not realize that you are--or at any rate are supposed to be--a soldier on active service, under war conditions, and subject to all the rigours of such conditions? In the light of this, what kind of Christian are you?' The Lord does not let us off; He pulls us up, He really keeps us on a basis of discipline, because He views everything from the standpoint of the war and its issue, whether we are effectives or not. Perhaps that is why He was seemingly a little unkind to Elijah under the juniper tree. 'What are you doing here? You are supposed to be in the battle! What are you doing here? The battle is on! We have just had one tremendous set to on the mount, but we are not through with this yet. What are you doing here?' But whether that be the right interpretation of the story or not, I find that very often the Lord challenges me like that: 'What are you doing here, what do you mean by this? What are you down there for? Are you

forgetting that there is a war on and that you are in it?' So the Lord is careful, particular; He deals with us from that standpoint and on that basis.

And, as we said earlier, do not forget that the Lord takes account of us in secret. The parade ground is one thing, when everybody is looking on and we know what is expected of us before all eyes. But the Lord takes account of us in secret. He did of David. David was God's choice because He had watched him in secret--in secret responsibility. You and I must remember that God chooses and uses, promotes and advances, those who remain true without the incentive of publicity. Have you grasped that? Do you want the Lord to choose you, to use you, to advance you, to give you more responsibility, to promote you? He will do it, not by what you are in the public eye, but by what you are in secret: for it is there that discipline counts most--when there is nothing whatever to give us an incentive, other than, 'Well, there is a battle on, and we must count in it!'

This covers, of course, a lot of ground. It explains so much of the Lord's dealings with us, does it not? That is why we have such discipline, why we are put into positions where it is so hard, where there is seemingly no inspiration, no encouragement, no incentive at all. We are brought into situations where we are either going to stand or fall, and sometimes the testing is the more intense because it seems to us not to matter which we do. That is a real test of discipline!

(B) Provisioning

We come now to a factor that will sooner or later vitally affect an Army and all the units which make up the Army --the matter of provisioning. There may be much enthusiasm at the setting out, a good deal of abandonment. There may be a great deal of initial good spirit and good intention. But the things that count in the long run are constitution and stamina and endurance, and those things depend upon provisioning, on supplies, on food. You know Napoleon's statement, do you not, about that on which an Army advances? It is very true! And if it is true in the natural, it is equally, if not more, true in the spiritual. It is a very great mistake, indeed it positively imperils the Forces, to send them into the field on a hand to mouth basis of supply, without adequate support in resources. And in the story of which we are thinking, thinning ranks, disaffection, disintegration, and many other troubles arose because the men were not being properly fed, because adequate provisions were not available.

Provisioning A Vital Factor In Endurance

Food, then, is a vital factor in the whole strategy of war. Provisioning is, indeed, not a luxury--it is an absolute necessity; and that is true spiritually. You and I must put from our minds any idea that the obtaining of spiritual food is something optional, governed by whether we feel inclined for it or not. To have adequate resources available, and to make good use of them, is an essential part of the whole campaign. And so our attitude toward this matter has to be quite a serious one. The war depends upon our spiritual constitution, our powers of endurance, our stamina, and these in turn depend upon our feeding, upon the provision made. Fighting forces cannot continue indefinitely on stimulants, certainly not on 'dopes'; they need feeding.

But in the Christian world there is a lot of 'stimulating' and 'doping' going on that is not feeding. It is an endeavour to work something up, to get people going for a while; but it will not work when they come into situations where real endurance is called for. And so the Supreme Command takes account of this--it makes provision for a long term conflict; and the sooner we get adjusted to that, the better. There are those who may fight pretty well if they think it is all going to be over soon. But we know quite well, do we

not, from history that it is those who can hold out the longest who win the day. How much there is in the New Testament about this whole matter of spiritual stamina, and endurance, and steadfastness! "He that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved" (Matt. 10:22; 24:13). (Compare Heb. 3:6,14; 6:11; Rev. 2:26).

Now, there is far more in this matter of the Lord providing spiritual food for us than perhaps we realize. Let us make no mistake about it: sooner or later we shall be found out over this. It will be those who have been nourished in spiritual things, built up in spiritual things; who have made good use of all the possibilities of spiritual food available: it will be they who will stand when the real test comes. Is it not true to our experience, even in quite a simple way, that very often when we are up against things we are able to draw upon what the Lord has taught us in the past? Without that reserve, we should be at a loss--we could not get through; but now we are all the time able to draw upon what the Lord has given us. How wonderfully it rises up, again and again, just as He promised (John 14:26), to save us in a critical hour and situation! We remember His word and His way in the past: and it counts, it amounts to something. But on the other hand, how many there are who just go out under the pressure, because they have no background--they have not that knowledge of the Lord which the occasion demands.

The Need for Concern Regarding God's Provision

But we need to remember that, while the Lord is only too willing and ready to make provision, He does demand that there be a concern for it on the part of those for whom the provision is to be made. I think that this goes to the heart of a great deal. There is, as you know, a widespread complaint about this matter of spiritual food: a complaint that there is so little available, so little real teaching, so little strong meat. However it may be put, there is quite a complaint about this food shortage. But may not the existence of the condition complained of be very largely due to an insufficient concern for spiritual food on the part of either the officers or the people? They have not been careful over the matter, not really concerned about it. They have been content to live upon a light diet of Christian things. The Lord will make resources available for those who really mean business. For those who are really right in the battle, who are really concerned about His honour and about the victory, the Lord will see that adequate supplies are there. If you and I are not of that mind and disposition, the Lord Himself will not 'cast His pearls before swine'--He will not give His spiritual riches to those who are not greatly concerned. But, if we are, then He will make the provision.

You see, the Lord always aims to make His provision profitable, by giving it over against a practical background. There has to be a practical background before we can profit by the provision the Lord makes. That is why He is constantly precipitating us into situations that make it necessary for us to know Him in some deeper way. Is it not a very familiar fact that what we have in the whole of the New Testament is given to us over against a very practical background? Men did not sit down to write essays and treatises, and that sort of thing. They were facing extremely critical situations, and they wrote to meet those situations. It was matters of life or death that drew out all these writings. That was the background; and what was true then is still true in our lives, that we shall never profit by the Lord's provision unless we have a practical background.

The Divine Provision--"The Bread Of Life"

What we need to grasp is that the principle of food is life. It is not a matter of whether we like or dislike, whether we fancy or do not fancy--whether we are 'finicky'--it is not that at all. It is simply and entirely a

matter of life--LIFE! That is why the Lord Jesus said: "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35). And if we are to profit by that Bread, there must be the same life in us as is in the Bread. There must be a correspondence of life--life taking hold of life and life ministering to life. It has to be a vital matter, not just interest.

It is a solemn fact that you can have a thorough going acquaintance with the Bible as a book, and you can attend all the Bible lectures that are going, and still not grow spiritually. I know that to be true. For some years I was closely associated with Dr. Campbell Morgan, as one of the members of his Bible Teachers' Association, the whole method of which was the analytical teaching of the Bible. But with all that, and years of it, many of the people who attended the Bible lectures showed little or no spiritual growth. Very few of them came to anything like spiritual maturity; they were still babes after they had heard it all. They had it all stored in their notebooks--they knew it in that way; but as for being vital factors in the great campaign, they counted for little or nothing.

No: it is not merely a question of knowing the Bible in that way, although that may be a useful thing as a foundation. The essential thing is that it should be a matter of life--indeed of life or death. Those are the two alternatives. Our very survival depends upon this matter of food.

And the food is Christ. The Lord Jesus did not say, 'I give you a volume of teaching to feed upon.' He said: "I am the bread of life"--'I, personally, am the bread of life'. And so before we can profit by the bread we must know a vital, practical relationship with Him. There has to be a life-relationship between the feeder and the food.

It is really a question of the kind of food. Different species require different kinds of food: the food of one class of creation differs from that of another. You and I could not live on the food of certain species of animal; they probably could not live on our kind of food. A spiritual person (which is to say a normal Christian) belongs to a species whose need can only be met by spiritual feeding: that is, by a real, living knowledge of the Lord; and it is that alone that will make for triumphant warfare. A 'natural', intellectual acquisition of knowledge of the Bible is no substitute for spiritual food.

Let us, then, seek to draw the important lessons from all this. Let us not think of spiritual provision as something that we can take or leave. Such an attitude will find us out in the battle, sooner or later. I believe that there are many in this world who are now discovering the tremendous value of all that they have been taught and have learnt of the Lord in the past, while others are finding that they have not the resource for going through.

(C) Flexibility

I quote again from the book: 'The hardest test of generalship is to hold the balance between determination and flexibility. In this the enemy failed. He scored highly by determination; he paid heavily for lack of flexibility.'

In case this word 'flexibility' should occasion difficulty, let us suggest some alternatives. For instance: adjustableness; adaptability; teachableness, or 'teachability'; resourcefulness; originality. These are all sidelights on the word 'flexibility'. In the South East Asia campaign, the quotation that I have given meant just this: that the enemy had got so much into a rut; he was so decided on a certain course, and was so rigidly bound by it, that if anything upset it he was completely demoralized. He had no alternative; he had no resourcefulness with which to meet a surprise, to meet something that was outside of his programme. If things went off his set course, he was just thrown into confusion. As this quotation says, 'he paid heavily

for his lack of flexibility'. Here we really have something to learn.

Perhaps we cannot make too much of the quality of determination. The New Testament is so full of the matter of steadfast endurance: being set on going on: not being turned aside; and this is right--we should be people like that. But you see what is said here: 'The hardest test of generalship is to hold the balance between determination and flexibility.' When you get down to it, you find that that really is a hard lesson: it is a hard thing to learn how to adjust yourself to new situations, and yet remain steadfast. Happily, we have some illustrations of this in the New Testament, and we do not go very far into the history of the Church before we come on them.

(1) Peter And Cornelius

Now Peter had got his fixed way, his fixed position, according to the Old Testament and his interpretation of it. And from his fixed position, his rigid, static position, he would argue with the Lord: "Not so, Lord"! Until he had "thought on the vision" (Acts 10:19), and got through with the Lord on the matter, he was not flexible, he was not adjustable, he was not even teachable. But what a tremendous advance, not only for Peter, but for the whole Church, when, without giving away any steadfastness or determination, he adjusted to the new light that the Lord gave, to a new knowing of the Lord, and the way of the Lord. And yet many people cannot do that; they just cannot do it.

(2) Philip And The Ethiopian Eunuch

Take the incident of Philip and the eunuch. It is just the same principle. Philip was down at Samaria, and under the blessing of the Lord wonderful things were happening. Philip could easily have said, 'The Lord is blessing me, the Lord is doing a great thing: I ought therefore not to leave this--this is where the Lord is working, this is what the Lord is doing', and so on. Well, of course it depends upon whether the Lord tells you to or not. But it also depends on whether you are open to the Lord: upon your having no fixity or finality about your position, but being ready to be moved by the Lord--even though it may seem a strange kind of move to be transferred from a revival centre, with many coming to the Lord, to an almost empty desert.

Nevertheless, it meant no small advance for the Church that Philip was flexible. For the matter did not end with a desert. From that point there opened up for Philip a long story of ministry. We are not now dealing with New Testament development or history; but you will find, if you look into it, that, after this contact with the Ethiopian, some very vital things came into being through the ministry of Philip. And it all hung upon this matter of flexibility, adjustableness; on whether the Lord was free to have His way in that life, or whether Philip would say, 'No: this is where I am and this is how things are; this is what the Lord is doing and where He is doing it; and here I stay'! It may be that comparable issues are in the balance in the lives of many servants of the Lord to day.

(3) Paul And Macedonia

One more illustration--and it is a very great one, is it not?--Paul and Macedonia. Paul was set on going to Asia and Bithynia. But he came to the point where he was brought up short--"forbidden of the Holy Spirit": "the Spirit of Jesus suffered them not" (Acts 16:6-7). But Paul was adjustable, that is the point; he was flexible. And so--Macedonia and Europe! and how much more!!

These three examples illustrate the principle of being open to the Lord: of being in the Lord's hands and not in your own: of not being under any fixed mind as to what the Lord should do, and where He should do it, or how He should do it--that is with Him. It is one of the most important principles that the Lord would teach us.

God's Unchanging Truths And Changing Methods

We have to recognize that there are two sets of things. On the one side there is fundamental truth, about which we are never flexible and from which we never depart. There can be no question of giving up fundamental truth, or of changing our foundations. They remain: on that we are--or should be-- inflexible. We ought to be immovable, too, on the matter of the all governing object of God: as to that, we are set, and nothing will move us. And it is also required that we be found with steadfastness of spirit.

But, on the other side, we have to recognize that God changes His methods. While He does not change His truths and His foundations and His object, He changes His methods. He has in His own sovereign right the prerogative to do as He will, and to do a new thing that was never heard of before. But that is something that Christianity today, for the greater part, just will not allow! It will not even allow God Almighty to do something that He has never done before! The lines are set, the whole compass of truth is boxed; the methods are so and so, the recognized ways and means are these. Depart from these, and--well, you are unsafe, you are dangerous. There is no room allowed for the Holy Spirit to do new things. But herein is the balance: with the unchanging foundations of truth, unchanging object of God, unchanging steadfastness of spirit, on the one side, there is yet, with all that, a balance to be kept, on the other side, with God's changing methods, God's sovereign right to 'go off the lines' if He wills: for the lines may not be His lines at all--they may be man's lines. God says, "I will do a new thing", and His absolute right to do a new thing must be recognized.

So much, then, for flexibility. It is a very important thing. Fixity in tradition, immovability in certain doctrinal positions, is resulting in great misunderstanding and confusion, arrest and disintegration. Through this limiting of the Holy Spirit, much is being lost.

Now, even if we do not grasp or appreciate much of the details, there are simple lessons lying on the surface of these three things that we have considered.

(a) Discipline. The Lord must have a disciplined people, and He is very particular about our discipline in all its connections--behaviour, spiritual health, and so on.

(b) Provisioning. The Lord would have a well nourished people, and He would have us careful about our spiritual food, to guard it. The enemy has a real eye to business on the food of God's people, as Gideon will tell us (Judges 6:3-4, 11).

(c) Flexibility. The Lord's desire is that, while we should be very steadfast and immovable as to those things which are fundamental to the faith, and in spirit, and in relation to His ultimate end, we should yet be so open to Him, so teachable, as to be, in a right way, pliable; in a right way, yes, changeable. There is much paradox about all these things, is there not? It is wrong to be changeable in some ways, but when it is the Lord calling for this adjustableness to Himself and what He would do, it is certainly right, and our response may, indeed, affect the whole issue of the war.

These things, presented to us in the Word by illustration and incident, embody very important principles. But when all is said, it comes back to this--everything strengthens this matter: We are in a war--a war that is no mere vague, abstract, 'airy fairy' kind of thing, but is very real, with many practical matters relating to the issue. These practical matters of behaviour, of provisioning, and of adjustability, all relate to the issue of this war.

The Lord teach us, then, the laws of--

OUR WARFARE!

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