

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, January 19, 1992, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

1 TIMOTHY 4:7

“Take the time and the trouble to keep
yourself spiritually fit.” (Phillips)

THE THREE SPIRITUAL HABITS OF EFFECTIVE CHRISTIANS

Have you seen all the TV advertising recently for Nordic Track? Well, I broke down and bought one a few weeks ago, and I just wish you could see your Pastor down in the basement, in the gray light of dawn, in T-shirt and trunks, cross-country skiing!! Man, is it ever good for the cardiovascular system!

Today there's a lot of emphasis on physical exercise, and being physically fit, but the Bible says that spiritual fitness is far more important than physical fitness. Tell me - are you spiritually fit for the 1990s?

1 Timothy 4:7 says, “Take the time and the trouble to keep yourself spiritually fit.” Notice, it's not automatic; it takes time and it takes trouble to be spiritually fit, just as it takes time and trouble to become physically fit. You have to get into the habit of doing your spiritual exercises.

You say, “Why should I take the time to do this?” Well, the next verse in the Living Bible says, “Exercise yourself spiritually and practice being a better Christian because that will help you not only now in this life, but in the next life too.”

How do I become spiritually fit? By the exercise of spiritual habits. Today I want to talk about what I consider to be the three indispensable spiritual habits of highly effective Christians. They've done studies of superbly successful people, people who achieve and surpass their goals in life, and they've discovered that the unique difference between achievers and non-achievers are the habits that they develop. Sonja Henie, the greatest woman figure skater of all time, practiced on the ice eight hours a day, seven days a week, for years. And the same thing is true of Christians. Over the years I've observed literally hundreds of believers, and I'm sure there are common denominators. Indeed, there are three things you will find in every spiritually fit person. I would humbly testify that these habits have blessed and strengthened my own life. I don't think they are optional. And I believe that if you're serious about being fit spiritually for this last decade of this millennium, you need to do these three things:

1. Get time with God every day. Having a “Quiet Time” is what this is called. Now to develop a new habit, you have to understand three things:

- you need to understand the reason - why do I practice this habit?

- you need to understand the routine - how do I practice it? and
- you need to understand the result - what is the benefit of this habit in my life? In a word, I need to know the purpose, the procedure, and the payoff.

Now what is the reason for a daily quiet time with God, where I get alone with God for a few minutes, and spend time reading the Bible and praying? The reason is to get direction from God. Look at Psalm 25:4 (Living Bible: “Show me the path where I should go, Oh Lord; point out the right road for me to walk. Lead me...” Folks, I can’t tell you how many of the major decisions in my life I’ve made during my quiet times with God! Most people are in such a hurry they never hear God speak to them. They don’t slow down to get guidance from God. So, the reason for our daily time with God is to get guidance.

Now, what is the routine? Look at what Luke 5:16 says: “Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.” Circle that word “lonely.” The routine is “get alone.” Jesus is our Model. You need to get off by yourself with no radio or TV. Few people lived busier lives than Jesus did, but He made time to be alone with His heavenly Father on a daily basis. Notice it says, “He often withdrew. . .” It was His habit.

Now what is the result? What happens when I get alone with God on a daily basis, to read the Bible and pray? The result is found in John 15:7 (Good News Bible); Jesus says, “If you remain in Me and My words remain in you, then you may ask for anything you wish, and you shall have it.” You see, when you remain in Christ, and His words remain in you, then you are living as close to Christ as is humanly possible; and as a result of that, your prayers will be in complete accord with God’s will, and they will be fully answered in God’s own way and in God’s own time. God says, “I want to help you. I want to answer your prayers!” “You have not” - why? – “because you ask not” (James 4:2) — over 20 times Jesus says, “Ask.”

So you read God’s Word and you pray. In your Quiet Time, what do you do first - do you read the Bible first, and then pray, or vice versa? It’s really up to you; but sometimes the best thing may be to do these two things simultaneously - you read/pray the Bible! You read it, and as you read and God says something to you, you talk back to Him - “Well, that’s interesting, Lord! I never really grasped the meaning of that verse before! Thank You, Holy Spirit, for revealing this new truth to me from Your Word.” And you just talk out loud. You say, “Yes, Lord, I need that in my life!” You read/pray the Bible at the same time.

You say, “What is the best time to get alone with God?” The best time is when you’re at your best, and that varies from person to person. Some of you hit the ground running in the morning. It’s - “Let’s go; let’s take on the world!” Others of you - you don’t believe in God until after noon! How many of you like to hit the ground running? How many of you don’t believe in God till after noon? The best time for your Quiet Time is when you’re at your best. But if you’re going to be a highly successful Christian you must make time to be alone with God every day.

Now the second indispensable habit with regard to spiritual fitness is this:

2. Give a Tithe to God every Week. That involves your money. Take the first ten percent of all you make and give it back to God. Why? Because He says so! That's a good enough reason in itself! Remember, He could have said 90%, because it all belongs to Him anyway. We wouldn't have anything apart from Him. But He says, "Give ten percent back to Me." Why? Because it's a symbol, a sign of what's really important in my life.

What's the reason for tithing? The reason is that it draws me closer to God. Every time you give your tithe, it draws you closer to God. Read with me Matthew 6:21: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Wherever I put my money, that's where my heart is. If I gamble my money at the racetrack, that's where my heart is. If I play the stock market, that's where my heart is. A friend of mine who is a stock broker told me once that some retired men will make a habit of coming down to the office, and they will sit and watch the big screen that tells them how their stocks are doing! It's not hard to know where their heart is! But if I put my money with the Lord, that is where my heart will be. And every time I give an offering to God, it draws me closer to Him. And by the way, giving generously and sacrificially makes me like God, because God is the One Who gave His all for us; and if I want to be like Him, I've got to learn to give.

Look at Deuteronomy 14:23 (Living Bible): "The purpose of tithing is to teach you always to put God first in your lives." Why does God want me to tithe? I give the first part of my income back to the Lord in order to say to Him, "Lord, You're Number One in my life!" It helps me keep my priorities right. Honestly, folks, I think the only antidote to materialism is giving. I don't know any other way to fight it. We're in a world that says, "Get, get, get!" and the only way to fight materialism is to do the exact opposite - GIVE! Do you want to be less materialistic in '92? Give! It's the spiritual habit of all highly effective Christians. That's why you do it.

Now, what's the routine? When do you do it? Look at 1 Corinthians 16:2 (Living Bible): "On the first day of every month" (?) No, that's not what it says. "On the first day of every year" (?) No. "On the first day of every (what?) week set aside some of what you have earned during the week and give it as an offering. The amount depends on how much the Lord has helped you earn." Now notice that it says, "On the first day of every week" - what day is that? The Lord's Day. Why do you think Paul says that? Because he wants my offering to be a high act of Christian worship as it helps to remind me Who is first in my life. What more eloquent act of worship could you engage in than to whisper, as you drop your envelope into the offering plate, "Lord, You're Number One in my life"? If I give the first tenth of what I earn on the first day of the week, then I'm telling God that He has first place in my life.

We are to give "weekly," says Paul. You could just save it all up to the end of the year and give it all at once. But God says, "I want you to have a weekly reminder!" Personally I could write out a check each month for my tithe. But I don't. I write out that check every week except when I'm going to be away on vacation, and then I pay up in advance. And I hope you all do that too. It keeps our treasurer from having the midsummer "blahs"! It's a weekly reminder of Who's in charge of my finances. You say, "What if I'm paid monthly or bimonthly?" Well, do what Paul says here, "Set it aside." If you're paid twice a month, take a tithe of that, and divide it in two, and give the half each week as your weekly reminder of Who is first in your life. You say, "What if I'm not there on Sunday? I'm ill." Just mail it in to the Church Office. I know that Mrs.

Bredehoft just loves to open those letters and see the checks spilling out! That's the routine.

Now what's the result? Why would anybody get into this tithing routine? I mean, I could use that money to pay bills, to make the monthly payment on a new car! Why would anyone take the first ten percent of all he makes, and give it back to the Lord on the first day of each week? Notice the result – incredible blessing! Look at Malachi 3:10: “Bring your whole tithe into My storehouse. Test Me in this, says the Lord, and see if I won't throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that (what?) you won't have enough room for it!” Do you know that there are more promises in the Bible related to giving than to any other thing? Why? Because God wants to teach you how to be a giver. In 47 years of ministry I have never known a poor or an unhappy tither!

You've got to decide whether, in your life, you're going to be a “taker” or a “giver” - “Am I going to be miserable as a miser, or am I going to be a giver and be happy?” God says, “I dare you. ...Try Me. Test Me!” Let's have a game to see who can give the most, me or God! God says, “The more you give to Me, the more I'll give to you. We're going to have a contest, and you cannot out-give Me!”

So, how can I be spiritually fit for 1992?

1. I get time with God every day; and
2. I give a tithe to God every week. And that handles my time and my money. But there's one other important aspect of your life, and if you're going to have spiritual fitness, God has got to be in charge of your time, and your money, and your relationships.
3. **I need to get together with other believers regularly.** The Bible doesn't say how often -- just as often as you can. This is called “fellowship.” This word, as you know, is derived from the Old English “two fellows on the same ship”! It was a long trip, and they had to get to know each other! They were heading in the same direction and making for the same destination! FELLOWSHIP. Now you need fellowship with a large group, and you need fellowship with a small group. Why do I need to get together with other believers?

Here's the reason -- to be encouraged by each other. The fact is -- life is tough. I see some of you dragging yourselves in here on Sunday mornings looking as if you've been through the meat grinder. By the way, it's usually the men who look like that; the ladies can disguise it with makeup! You come, tired and fatigued, and you've gotten beat up out in the business world, or in the home looking after the kids and the thousand other chores that wear you down. And I see our church as a spiritual filling station where we get gassed up, where we get our batteries recharged before starting the rat race all over again.

Why do we get together with other believers? Look at Hebrews 10:25 (Good News Bible): “Let us not give up the habit of meeting together... Instead, let us encourage one another.” How many of you have ever been encouraged by coming to a service at Faith? Of course we have! Many a time as I enter this room at 10:30 a.m. I can feel the electricity in the air - everybody's loving and friendly, and we're meeting as a family, and with an attitude of expectancy, and we

just know that God is here to bless us!

Power is released when we get together like this. Notice the writer says, “Don’t give up the habit of meeting together.” You ought to make a habit of meeting together with other believers regularly; because the fact is, you will never be an effective Christian if you try to do it alone. You’re just not going to make it. It’s too tough. There’s no such thing as a “Lone Ranger Christian.” “No man is an island” said John Donne; we need each other. We need to support each other. If I get away from God and from God’s people I grow cold, like a piece of coal lifted out of the fire and set by the side of the fireplace. I need to be encouraged. When people say it’s no big deal to miss church on a Sunday morning, they have no idea what they’re doing to their lives. When I lost my voice and had to stay home recently, I missed you all so much, and I felt miserable and frustrated - “Lord, why are You doin’ this to me?!” The reason for getting together is for mutual encouragement.

What’s the routine? The routine for getting together with other believers is at church and in homes. A fine example of this is found in Acts 5:42, “(They met) day after day, in the Temple courts and from house to house.” Notice two things here:

a. You need regular contact with other believers - “day after day” it says, not just on Sundays, but as often as you can. You see, folks, once a week on Sunday, to get together with other Christians, is just not enough for the 1990s. You need more input and support than that. You need more encouragement and inspiration. And a spiritual meal on Sunday morning is like saying, “I’ll eat one morning a week and I’ll fast the other six days,” and expect to be healthy! You need some things throughout the week - some Bible studies. You need to get together with other Christian friends at work. You need to be in a large group on Sunday and a small group during the week. The early Christians met at the Temple, and from house to house. And you need both of these - you need large group celebration, and you need small group cells. It’s great getting together in a large group - you feel you’re part of something significant. You realize, “I’m not the only one out there struggling!” And I would much rather sing with 1,000 people than with ten. There’s that feeling that God is at work and the Kingdom is growing. So we need large group fellowship.

b. But you also need small group fellowship - “from house to house”; in homes, because you can’t share all your insights and all your needs with everyone here this morning. You need a small group where you can pray and study the Word and share together and build some close friendships; do some fun stuff from time to time; have parties and celebrate - all these things! Everyone in this congregation should be in a small group; and if you aren’t, and want to be, let us know, and we will get you into one.

So let one 1992 goal be to get involved in a small group for fellowship. Don’t be frightened; they won’t ask you to reveal your darkest sin! So lighten up and join! You say, “Why should I do that?”

Well, look at the result of getting together with believers regularly. Ecclesiastes 4:9,10 (Good News Bible) says, “Two are better off than one, because together they can work more effectively. If one of them falls down, the other can help him up.” Do you want to be an effective

Christian? You can't do it alone. By the way, this verse gives a good plug for marriage, doesn't it?! "If one falls down, another can help him up." There's strength in numbers. Could you imagine a soldier saying, "I'm going to fight the battle, but I'm going to do it all by myself." That's ridiculous, but it's like a Christian who tries to fight the world, the flesh and the devil by himself! We're in a battle, folks, and you need fellow soldiers.

January 26 is Super Bowl Sunday, and a quarterback without ten other men on the field to help him is like a Christian without a church and a small group. You need to be a member of a team. And out there on that football field, when somebody's really good, and the enemy is really attacking, they'll "double team" him. And sometimes when some hunk is just running through the line, you have to "gang tackle" the guy. Now let me tell you something — there are some problems in your life right now -- I don't know what they are, but the only way they're going to be solved is by having them gang-tackled. You've got to get some help. You've got to get some other Christians praying for you -- praying for that sick child, praying for that relationship, for that marriage, for that job opportunity. And we need each other to gang-tackle each other's problems - "I'll help you; you help me!" And the result is increased effectiveness. In 1992 you need to team up with some other believers.

Now these are three indispensable habits if you're serious about being spiritually fit; and they relate to your time, your money, and your relationships.

Some of you are saying, "Pastor, I want to develop these habits in my life, but the honest truth is — I'm not very well disciplined. I'm a good starter, but I just don't keep at it."

May I make a suggestion? I think there's something that can help you be consistent in your Christian life. At the end of the Book of Nehemiah the whole nation of Israel made a growth covenant before God. They said, "We want to do what's right. But most of us are inconsistent. So we're going to make a covenant together - to pray for and encourage each other." And they signed that covenant and their leaders put their seal on it. Look at Nehemiah 9:39: "...We are making a binding covenant, putting it in writing, and our spiritual leaders are affixing their seals to it."

I want to urge you to do something now. Look at the insert in the Bulletin (see attachment).

Look what it says underneath:

"Take the time and the trouble to keep yourself spiritually fit. Bodily fitness has a limited value, but spiritual fitness is of unlimited value, for it holds promise both for this present life, and for the time to come" (1 Timothy 4:7, Phillips).

Now, you notice there is a place for you to affix your signature. I hope you will do that. You can see that I, as your spiritual leader, have signed it and laminated it — that's my seal for the 1990s!! Now, this isn't a commitment between you and me - it's a commitment between you and God - that's why I don't want to know whether you've signed it or not.

Keep this in your Bible all year to remind yourself -- “I really want to grow spiritually -- to be spiritually fit.”

This is your choice, but if you're in deadly earnest about your spiritual growth, consider making this covenant before God right now!

AMEN.

Attachment to January 19, 1992 sermon, Faith Presbyterian Church

MY 1992 GROWTH COVENANT

I commit to:

A Daily Time with God — Mark 1:35
Personal Bible Reading and Prayer

A Weekly Tithe to God — 1 Corinthians 16:2
Giving the First 10% of My Income

A Committed Team for God — Hebrews 10:25
Fellowship with Believers in a Small Group

Signature

(signed) W. Graham Smith
Pastor

“Take the time and the trouble to keep yourself spiritually fit. Bodily fitness has a limited value, but spiritual fitness is of unlimited value, for it holds promise both for this present life and for the life to come.”

1 Timothy 4:7 (Phillips)