

Stewardship of Self for Cross-Cultural Workers: General Principles

Assuming that you agree that you need to take care of yourself, what are the general means of healing grace, practices that help you take care of yourself? What are the general categories of practices that can be applied to a variety of different challenges or struggles Christian workers have?

Of course, we are assuming that you are making use of the spiritual disciplines that are available to you as a follower of Christ, such as reading the Word, praying, fasting, worshiping with others, serving others, taking communion, and drawing apart for reflection and meditation. Although the primary purpose of these spiritual disciplines is to promote eternal life, they are also valuable for our lives here on earth. Consistent with Scripture, general revelation (systematic study of God's creation) shows the following practices valuable in stewardship of self.

Study God's Word and God's world

Find out what God has said about your struggle in his **Word** (his special revelation) by using concordances, commentaries, and other Bible study aids you have available.

In addition, look at what people studying God's **world** (natural revelation; Romans 1:20) have found about that challenge by considering material available on the Internet, in books, and through your own observations.

- The **Internet** has much information available free of charge. Some of it is

worthless, but that found in the .gov and .edu domains is often quite reliable. MEDLINEplus (www.Medlineplus.gov) is an excellent place to start any search for health-related information.

- Good **books** are available, many of them by Christian authors. For example, *Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide* (Rev. ed.) by Gary R. Collins, (Word Publishing, Dallas, TX) contains more than 700 pages of excellent material for about \$20. It is a good source for anyone who wants a clearer understanding of human behavior from a Christian perspective. The book covers personal, developmental, interpersonal, identity, family, and other issues.
- **Study** yourself and others. God has given you the capacity to learn about yourself and solve many of your problems by observing yourself and others.

Train up the child within

One fruit of the spirit is self-control. Self-control is aided by monitoring our own behavior and by rewarding ourselves immediately and effectively for healthy behaviors. Similarly, we can cope with unhealthy behaviors by substituting healthy behaviors and reinforcing those. For example, the Bible says we should stop lying and tell the truth, stop stealing and work, stop unwholesome talk and build others up, get rid of bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, malice and be kind, compassionate, and forgiving (Ephesians 4:25-32).

Tell the truth in love

Telling the truth in love involves confessing and confronting, being both

humble and assertive, expressing both the negative and positive. God illustrates this in Revelation 2 and 3 where he tells something good about each church. He then says, "Yet I hold this against you" (2:4), "Nevertheless, I have a few things against you" (2:14), and "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline" (3:19).

On the one hand, Christian workers need to be humble and vulnerable, admitting our mistakes, faults, and sins. We need to be willing to ask for help, guidance, and counsel—a task often difficult for Christian workers. It is hard because many such people believe they should not heed help from others. After such confession, we need to ask others to check on us relative to changing our behavior, to hold us accountable.

On the other hand, Christian workers need to be able to set boundaries with others, be able to say "No" when necessary. In addition to affirming others, we need to be able to tell them how they are hurting themselves, others, the cause of Christ, and us. Of course, all of this caring confrontation must be done in love.

Choose you this day

Not only do you need to choose God but also intentionally make conscious decisions to do something about your struggles and problems. A public commitment to work on them along with regular reminders to yourself will make it more likely that you will actually do something about them.

So whatever your problem, make a conscious commitment to do something about it. Then make your commitment known to a specific person or persons. Finally, find ways to remind yourself about your commitment to

work on that problem. For example, in Joshua 24 the people reviewed their covenant with God. When Joshua told them his household was going to serve the Lord, they too said they would serve God. They made commitments to each other as witnesses, recorded those commitments in writing, and set up a stone to remind them of what they had done.

A time for everything

Moderation can merge optimism and pessimism into a healthier realism. God works through all things for good, whether they seem good or bad to us at the time. Within biblical boundaries, all emotions are appropriate. Of course love is appropriate, but so is anger when appropriately expressed. Likewise joy and elation are appropriate, but so are sadness and grief in some circumstances. Ecclesiastes 3 points out that there is a time for everything, so experience all your emotions and express them appropriately.

Denied emotions lead to problems, and the Bible recognizes all emotions, encouraging their appropriate expression. Moderation does not mean you are emotionless, just that your sadness is moderated by joy, and so forth. We are to be moderate not only in the experience and expression of emotion but also in our thoughts and lifestyles.

Health to the whole body

Proverbs 4:20-22 points out that God's words are life and health to a person's whole body. God wants us to have life and health, to use practices that promote good health. The Bible deals with things as routine as eating, sleeping, and exercising.

A balanced diet is essential for good physical and mental health. Food is mentioned in the Garden of Eden before the fall into sin. Later food became a part of the worship of God in the feast days observed by his people. The Old Testament contains many references to the foods God's people were allowed to eat as well as foods that were not good for them. When Elijah became so depressed he wanted to die, God sent food (1 Kings 19).

The Bible also talks about the sleep of God's people being sweet, pleasant, peaceful, and sustaining. God cautions us against getting too little sleep when we try to get too many material things, rise up too early, and stay up too late. He also cautions about becoming a sluggard and sleeping when we should be working. The quality of our sleep is important to him, and we need to realize that having adequate sleep is important to our physical and mental health.

When comparing physical and spiritual exercise, Paul pointed out that the spiritual is more important—but that physical training is of value to Christian workers (1 Timothy 4:6-8). In our culture getting exercise is even more important than in his day when people walked and rowed everywhere they went, getting exercise in the normal tasks of everyday life.

Fellowship

Research has repeatedly shown that the single most important factor in dealing with stress is social support. Of course, God pointed this out in Genesis 2 when he noted that it was not good for people to be alone. Created in God's image, we are social beings and need each other. Jesus trained his disciples as a group and sent them out in pairs,

not as individuals. As part of the body of Christ, we need the perspectives and gifts of others.

Unfortunately, some cultures, such as the one in the United States, emphasize individuality at the expense of the group. Within our larger group of acquaintances we need a smaller circle of close friends with whom we can share much more deeply. Make those kinds of friendships not only for your own good but also for the ministry you can have to others as well. We are to encourage each other, build each other up, and carry each others' burdens (1 Thessalonians 5:11, Galatians 6:2).

Bear your own burdens: Remember

Thousands of years ago God's people remembered by literally binding God's precepts to their door mantle, their clothing, or their foreheads. They meditated to keep them in mind through replaying the Word, rehearsing it to make it a part of themselves.

We also need to encourage ourselves when we do the right things. If other people are not around to provide that support, we need to "coach" and "reward" ourselves for healthy behaviors. We also need to confront ourselves when we do wrong. Perhaps this is part of being responsible, to the degree we can be, for bearing our own burdens (Galatians 6:5).

Use resources at hand

God has given you natural gifts and experiences so that you can make use of the materials around you. When David was to face Goliath, he found that he would not be able to fight using armor, shield, spear, and sword. However, he was an expert at using a

staff, a sling, and stones he picked up in the streambed. Using things with which he was familiar, he was victorious in an "impossible situation" (1 Samuel 17).

Samson used the jawbone of an ass. Moses used his staff. Jesus used the loaves and fish that someone had brought along for lunch. God multiplies and empowers whatever you offer to him. You do not rely only on your resources at hand but ask God to transform and use them to meet your needs.

Keep the vision

Without vision, people perish. As a Christian worker God has given you a global picture of where you fit in the world. This picture or story gives you the framework within which you can understand the problem and produce the solution to it. Though you may feel like David in the shadow of a huge problem (Goliath), you know that the battle is the Lord's.

Think how John Mark must have felt when cousin Barnabas wanted to take him on their second cross-cultural term and when Paul refused to give him another chance. Of course, God used both the rebuke of Paul's refusal and the sympathetic support of his cousin to make him the man God could use. He not only became valued by Paul but also became author of part of God's Word.

Christ taught most often using parables and stories. As we often say today, "One picture is worth a thousand words." Therefore, selecting a metaphor or analogy that fits your struggle, one that provides hope and guidance, is often helpful.

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