Living a disciplined life in order to follow Jesus

Reading Deuteronomy 30:1-10, how often do you find the pronoun ‘you’ as the subject of an active verb? For those of you who don’t ‘do’ grammar, that means the number of times the text mentions that ‘you’ will ‘do’ something. How many different things does Moses say that the people will do? To what extent do these different actions lie within the nation’s power? Do they have the capacity to decide that they will do these things, and to put that decision into practice?

We probably all have experience of knowing that we ought to do something and failing to do it. Paul describes just this kind of experience in Romans 7:15-20. What does he diagnose as being the cause of the problem? Looking ahead into the opening verses of Romans 8, what is the solution? In your own experience, to what extent has the power of sin been neutralised or diminished by what Paul describes God as doing in Romans 8:3-6? The Spirit is not explicitly mentioned in Deuteronomy 30:1-14, but what can this passage tell us about the difference the Spirit makes to our capacity to love and obey the Lord?

What do you think Moses means when he talks about circumcision of the heart (Deuteronomy 30:6)? The same verse talks about loving the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul so that we might live. What kind of life do you think we would have if we loved God with everything we have got? Do you think it is easy or difficult to live this way? What deters us from doing so, and what can we do about this?

When Paul talks about the righteous requirements of the law being fulfilled or fully met in us (Romans 8:4), we should not suppose that this happens automatically without any effort on our part! Obeying God requires a degree of self-discipline, which is the ability to control what we think, how we feel, what we say, how we behave, what we eat and drink, how we spend our time and our money. That is quite a list and it is probably not comprehensive! If we lack self-control in any of these areas, how can that impact our own lives and the lives of those around us?

God wants us to be able to lead self-controlled lives. Sin promises us freedom, but it actually enslaves us to our desires. God calls us to submit to him, but in our obedience to him he actually sets us free and enables us to govern our own lives well under the direction of his Spirit. ‘Being a slave of Christ sets me free.’ Do you agree with this statement? Is it self-contradictory, or does it express a paradoxical truth? If it is true, how and why does being a slave of Christ set us free? Where does self-discipline fit into this? Turning back to Deuteronomy 30:1-10, how many references to obedience do you find in these verses? Do you think that the importance of obedience is glossed over a bit today, or do we use other language to express the practical outworking of dedicated our lives to God?

Eberhard Bethge was Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s friend and biographer; he said, ‘Secret discipline without worldliness becomes pure ghetto; worldliness without secret discipline pure boulevard.’ How can we live effectively as people who are in the world but not of the world (John 17:14-17)?

The references to God prospering his people (Deuteronomy 30: 5, 9) rather make it look as if God expects his people to enjoy the good things in life. We should therefore be wary of confusing self-discipline and self-denial. Leisure, pleasure and treasure can all be God’s good gifts to us. Can self-discipline enhance our enjoyment of the good things in life? If so, why and how is this the case?

Is ’work hard, play hard’ a good principle to live by? Can laziness ever be a good thing? Why, or why not? As we move towards old age, we inevitably find that we begin to slow down. If you are in this category, what adjustments have you had to make and how have you coped with this process?

‘Deliver me, O God, from a slothful mind, from all lukewarmness, and all dejection of spirit. I know these cannot but deaden my love to thee; mercifully free my heart from them, and give me a lively, zealous, active, and cheerful spirit; that I may vigorously perform whatever thou commandest, thankfully suffer whatever thou choosest for me, and be ever ardent to obey in all things thy holy love.’

(John Wesley, *The SPCK Book of Christian Prayer*)