



## MARY SOUTHERLAND

*The Stress-Buster and Women's Ministry Motivator*



### **Experiencing God's Power in Your Ministry** **Mary Southerland**

I rarely watch television but occasionally flip through channels, in search of a few minutes of mindless entertainment. I especially enjoy shows featuring children in candid conversations because kids really do say the funniest things! The Bill Cosby Show is one of my favorites, especially the shows in which he dialogues with children – one on one. I recently watched an episode where Cosby was talking with one of Rudy's friends, a bright seven-year-old boy. "Do you have any pets?" Cosby asked. The little boy thought for a moment and then replied, "Well, I don't have any pets now, but I used to have some goldfish." Sensing a story, Cosby responded, "Tell me about the goldfish. What happened?" "Well," the boy began, "My science teacher said that our water is too hard for goldfish to live in but my mom puts stuff in the washer to make our clothes soft." Moans rumbled through the audience as the little boy continued, "So...I got me some of that stuff and put it in the aquarium...but Rudy said I put too much soft stuff in, 'cause the goldfish softened to death." A lack of godly discipline in our lives renders us "soft" to the things of God. When we surrender our lives to Him, He sets our feet on the right road. To stay on that road demands Godly discipline.

I am constantly amazed at the arrogance of which I am capable, daring to think I have the power within myself to intimidate Satan or thwart his efforts in my life. I have no power apart from God. I am weak without His strength, vulnerable to sin and a prime target for temptation. As a woman in ministry, I can easily get caught up in human affirmation, my own sense of self-importance or the flattery of others. The result is always spiritual arrogance. The solution is always godly discipline. Godly discipline is not only a hedge of protection in our lives; it is a catalyst for spiritual growth. James Dobson says, "If one examines the secret behind a championship football team, a magnificent orchestra, or successful business, the principle ingredient is discipline."

Now, I know the very word, "discipline", evokes distasteful images of pain, deprivation, sacrifice and surrender when, in fact, true discipline is simply a wholehearted "yes" to God. True discipline neither barter with God for control nor attempts to supercede His plan. Discipline does not make us worthy but is the result of understanding we are already worthy in God's eyes and living life as a response to that love. We are chosen, loved, bought and purchased by God who has a sacred blueprint for each one of us. Discipline accepts that blueprint, following it with an eager obedience wrapped in sweet abandonment and absolute trust in the architect of the master plan – God.

Godly discipline allows us to rest within the framework of God's sovereignty. When our son, Jered, was seven – years - old, he fell while skateboarding, cut his chin and needed stitches. We raced to the nearest emergency clinic where we were greeted by a young doctor, who at first glance, seemed friendly enough. Jered, however, took one look at the strange man in white and panicked in the midst of his first experience with stitches.

After several attempts to gain Jered's trust and cooperation, the doctor grew impatient and threatened, "Son, this won't hurt. If you cannot be still we will have to put you in restraints." This man obviously did not know who Jered was – mine – nor did he understand that he was now dealing with the wrath of Mary, something too horrible to describe. However, I was more than willing to enlighten him. I could see the warning in Dan's eyes, but chose to ignore it.

I had two major problems with the doctor's statements. First, no restraints were going to be placed on my son.

Secondly, of course the stitches would hurt. Glaring at the doctor I firmly explained, "If you will just tell Jered the truth and explain what you are doing he will be still for you." The doctor looked up at me as if I had just arrived from another planet and then, with an edge of sarcasm, spit out, "Right, lady. I know how to handle this." So did I - but before I could rip off his head, Dan intervened, telling the doctor we had a plan! I knew what *my* plan was but thought it wise to consider Dan's plan.

Gently holding Jered's head in his "daddy-sized" hands, Dan softly explained what the doctor would do, how he would do it and sweetly instructed our son to fix his eyes on me while I told him a story. It worked – of course. Jered calmed down and the stitches were done in a matter of minutes. The doctor even offered a sheepish apology, thanking us for teaching him a lesson in working with children. I decided to let him live.

Even though Jered did not fully understand the process or trust the doctor, Jered did fully understand and trust his father. Godly discipline is the basis for trust and is found at the feet of Jesus where we will come to know Him better, love Him more and find the discipline we so desperately crave.

Discipline is obedience, a lifetime process that brings us to a state of God-ordained order by training and controlling our behavior. Discipline is not self-improvement but rather, placing oneself under orders. Discipline is not the result of legalism but the reward of grace. Discipline is not rigidity but flexibility, always free to respond to the plan of the Master. Discipline is focusing and eliminating, zeroing in on what is important. In fact, godly discipline becomes a buffer against sin and temptation. Titus 2: 11-12 is clear on the importance of discipline in the life of every believer, "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age." (NIV)

Discipline, holding restraint in one hand and commitment in the other, is accomplished only through the power of the Holy Spirit, training and directing us in the ways of God. Our Father will neither give us good habits nor supply exemplary character. We must resolve to walk in an "upright" way. We must choose the good habits over the bad and "work out the salvation that God has worked in". We must choose and relish discipline.

The author of Proverbs offers a simple but powerful truth when he writes, "Apply your heart to instruction and your ears to words of knowledge" (Proverbs 23:12 NIV). "Apply" means to make a commitment, to decide or to choose! When we choose to apply discipline, God empowers that choice, freeing the Holy Spirit to cultivate a spiritual control and holy order that is clearly beyond ourselves. Discipline is the mutual effort between the Holy Spirit and our will, yielded and surrendered to God's authority, mastering right attitudes and establishing right habits. The purpose of discipline is to order our lives in such a way that we are available and prepared to be used by God anywhere, at anytime and in any way.

As women in ministry, people constantly look to us for the answers to some of life's most complex questions. If our personal lives and public ministries are in chaos and out of God's control due to a lack of discipline, the answers will be buried in a sea of confusion and we will be trapped by a deadly whirlpool of meaningless activity swarming with temptation and sin. A disciplined heart desires to please God. A powerful ministry does not stop at merely understanding discipline, but chooses to relish discipline, applying it to every area of life. How do we get there?

**Make the commitment to start.** A famous athlete, known to rise at 3:30 am each morning to begin his demanding regimen of exercise, was being interviewed by a major newspaper. When the experienced reporter asked him to share the secret of his success, the athlete responded, "That's easy. The secret to my success is discipline." The reporter laughed at the simplistic answer and persisted, "Yes, but how do you start leading a life of discipline?" The athlete grinned and said, "You decide to start." The same is true for us as women in ministry. A life of discipline begins with the commitment to start.

A country preacher was visiting one of his church members who owned a large wheat farm. As they stood, gazing out over the man's beautiful grain, the preacher commented, "Well, John, you and the Lord have done a good job on this wheat." The farmer looked thoughtfully across his field and after a few pensive moments said, "Preacher, you should have seen it when the Lord had it by Himself." Godly discipline is not some lofty, ethereal attribute, but feet to faith and hands to obedience. Richard Foster says, "The disciplined person is someone who can do what needs to be done when it needs to be done."

**Make the commitment to start now.** An undisciplined heart is full of good intentions that are never given life. Begin *now* to pursue discipline. You may not fully understand all that your commitment entails but the Holy Spirit certainly does. He will empower every well-ordered choice you make and guide every disciplined step of your journey to the heart of God. If we don't set priorities for life and for ministry, others will. Time thieves will steal the hours and days as we allow them to impose their plans and demands on us. While it is true that different women have different priorities in different seasons of ministry, it is also true that one priority remains steadfast. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God" (Matthew 6:33 NIV). Once that priority is firmly established, the rest of life and ministry will simply fall into place.

Godly priorities embrace God's plan. I am convinced that much of our frustration in ministry comes from doing things we were never intended to do. We create the plan as we go instead of resting in the plan He has for us. Discipline guides each step and establishes a basis for obedience and success in ministry. I am, by no means, an expert in the area of discipline, but I do want to share some simple ideas that work for me.

- **Prepare**

Just as we budget our money, we must budget your time. Every day, we are presented with twenty-four hours, and every day we must choose to either spend those hours or invest them. Every Sunday afternoon, I do two things – write a weekly column and plan the week ahead. I assign tasks to each day and prioritize those tasks in order of importance. That's the easy part. The hard part is sticking to the plan, but getting a head start offers a greater chance for success. Schedule one day a week to plan. The preparation will pay off.

- **Eliminate**

Once a month, have a family "spring cleaning". Go out to dinner, and together, eliminate anything that is hurting your family. Make a purposeful plan for adding only those activities that will strengthen each member of your family. I am convinced the reason many children of ministers grow up to resent the church is because they feel it robbed them of their parents.

- **Prioritize**

Learn to leave the "lesser" things undone. This lesson is especially hard for me because I actually believe I can do it all! The key to godly discipline and right priorities is learning what my "all" is, and doing all of that! My trusty "Superwoman" cape is never far away. Admittedly, it is a constant battle for me to ignore the presence of that cape, choosing to embrace and employ God's priorities – not mine. But it is definitely a battle worth fighting. Families, marriage, ministries and souls are on the line.

A right perspective is the direct result of godly discipline. In order to have right priorities, we must have right perspectives. Godly discipline brings a holy scrutiny to priorities and perspectives. Does it really matter? Is it eternal? Will it impact lives for God?

- **Delegate**

Include every family member in the work and include every family member in the play. The concept of "team" is essential to every successful family. A chore is not just a random assignment. It says, "You are an important part of this team – this family. We need you."

- **Simplify**

Give up on perfection. It is meant for heaven...not earth! I love the Amish saying, “The further we get from simple things, the further we get from God.” Jesus was born in sparse simplicity, a manger instead of a mansion. His teachings were simple enough for a child to understand. Simple but stunning truth is His message. We often overlook profound simplicity in search of hollow complexity, foolishly thinking that bigger is always better. When it comes to investing time, we need to employ simple godly discipline.

- **Yield**

When our children were small, I did not travel and speak as often as I do now. My greatest mission field is my home, my marriage and my children - easy words to write, but hard words to live. It does not matter how much I do or how successful I am in ministry. If home and family are left with only the scraps of our time, energy, and emotions, we are walking in sin and disobedience.

One of the greatest challenges in my life is to achieve and maintain a disciplined balance. I am not certain why balance is so hard to achieve, but one reason stands out from the rest – self. If “self” were a coin, one side of that coin would be pride. Earning the favor of God, proving my worth and longing for success feed that pride. The opposite side of the coin is insecurity. Believing the lies of the enemy, measuring my worth by what I do instead of whose I am, longing for man’s applause and earth’s acclaim can be counted on to fuel the sadistic fires of insecurity.

Both pride and insecurity are sin. Both are a preoccupation with self. Godly discipline draws attention to God and away from self, to His work and away from human effort, leaving the glory where it belongs - at His feet alone.

The most effective ministry comes from a disciplined life. Discipline builds upon discipline, each success encouraging another. Make the commitment to cultivate the disciplines of a godly woman, then pick a corner of your life and begin. Discipline does not come naturally or easily. We will surely fail but we can always begin again. Join me today in a new commitment to choosing to seek, apply and relish godly discipline.

“Though no one can go back and make a brand new start, my friend.

Quite anyone can start from new and make a brand new end.”

~ Author unknown ~

“A man may be consecrated, dedicated and devoted  
but of little value if undisciplined.”

Hudson Taylor

On a personal note, I honestly did not want to write this chapter and tried unsuccessfully to talk the Father out of my doing so. You see, while I hate the very word “discipline”, most people would describe me as a disciplined woman. If they only knew!

Discipline is a constant battle for me – in every area of life. Just when I have one area mastered (or so I think), another one falls apart! I want to be a champion for God but have to admit that I am often a miserable failure when it comes to discipline. My only hope is God and His power at work in me. The principles of holy discipline will ensure the life of a champion and allow us to experience the power of God in ministry.

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