

**Lazy dreamers** will never achieve the high goal of spiritual maturity without self discipline—in appetites, emotions, moods, speech, and priorities.

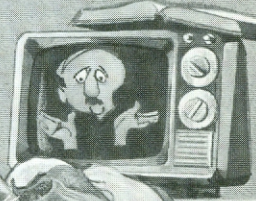
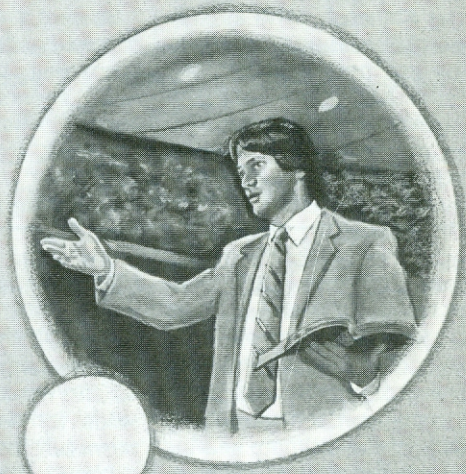
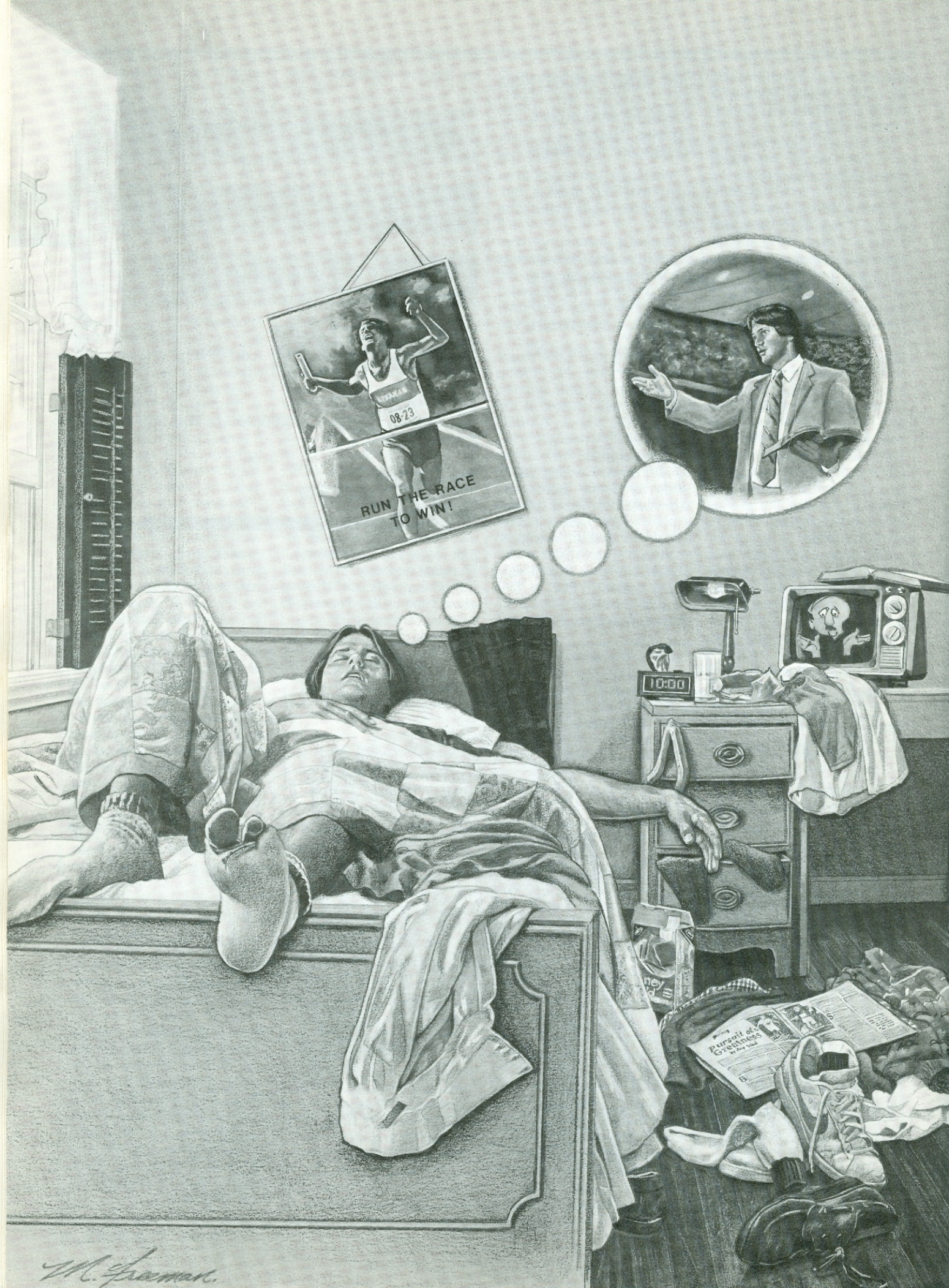
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by  
Richard  
Shelley Taylor

# Discipline: The Mark of Maturity

**The term discipline carries a** variety of meanings. To the child it means being compelled to do something undesirable and being punished if he rebels. Discipline for him means compulsion, pain, authority. To the soldier discipline means conformity to regulations, instant obedience to orders, K.P. duty, reveille on cold mornings. To the student it means the course of instruction he is undertaking, with the specific requirements and rules and examinations incident to it. I heard one man describe his academic qualifications in the words: "I submitted to the discipline of twelve units in psychology." To the Christian, discipline means *discipleship*—following Jesus, with one's self denied and one's cross





Pursuit of Greyness  
By [unreadable]

M. Gorman





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resolutely carried.

The child, the soldier, the student, the disciple are all correct. But there is something more. The aim of child discipline, or military, or academic, or religious, is a *disciplined character* which goes beyond the minimum whole life. Imposed discipline (of which we will say more later) must lead to self-discipline. It is even possible for the Christian to be a sincere and regenerated follower of Jesus, yet remain undisciplined in many facets of his character and in many areas of life. One may be a cross-bearer—one may, in fact, be purified from the carnal mind and filled with the Spirit—yet be merely on the threshold of that larger discipline of full maturity.

In a general sense, self-discipline is the ability to regulate conduct by principle and judgment rather than impulse, desire, high pressure, or social custom. It is basically the ability to *subordinate*.

### APPETITES

There are several aspects here. For one thing, there is included the ability to subordinate the body and its physical appetites to the service of the mind. Paul said, "I keep my body under." This was exemplified by a fellow preacher who became convinced that coffee was affecting his heart. A Norwegian—mind you—who had enjoyed his coffee all his life! "But," he said, "that moment it became a matter of conscience with me. So I stopped." Just that simple. He hasn't touched it since. This ability was also seen in another friend who was fifty pounds overweight. When challenged by the doctor he resolutely embarked on a rugged diet which he maintained in all company, at all places and times, until his weight was normal—much to the improvement of his health. He explained simply, "It's not a question of will power, but of 'won't' power . . . No thank you, I won't have any." Such drastic adjustments are not always necessary, but the day-by-day discipline in many little things is. In truth we may say that the finest display of such discipline is not the spectacular achievement but the permanent adjustment of living pattern.

The subordination of the physical includes not only the appetite for food but also the sex urge. In some this has been so humored that it is abnormally excitable. To make matters worse, such persons often live by the creed of impotence: "I can't help it," and similar expressions of moral flabbiness. Overindulgence even within marriage may have the effect of cultivating this basic urge until it is increasingly imperious in its demands. Those so afflicted are in grave danger of succumbing to temptations

from outside marriage when domestic stress, "frigidity" in their mates, long illness, or separations subject their enfeebled powers of self-control to an abnormal strain . . .

### EMOTIONS

Emotions must be subordinate to the reason. God wants all of us to be warm-hearted. But the warm heart must have the wisdom of maturity, or it can become (or remain) the giddy impulsiveness of adolescence. When warmth is not disciplined, it tends to degenerate into irresponsible sentimentality, caprice, frivolity followed by depression—or even worse, flirting and philandering.

Too often the mind serves only the purpose of devising excuses for doing what the heart wants to do. The heart needs to be first cleansed, then kept on the leash of discipline. Then it can safely become the copartner with the mind in living according to fixed principles. The disciplined man has learned this art. He distrusts his sudden impulses. Not that he is cold and calculating; he may be warm and sympathetic; but he has grown up "into Christ" and is not "tossed to and fro, and carried about" either by "every wind of doctrine" or the winds of impulse, fancy, and strange feelings . . .

### MOODS

Disciplined character also means the mastery of moods. This is yet another area of conquest in the subordination of one's emotions. Actually, the need here is two-fold. First, we must cultivate that fixedness of purpose, that steadiness of faith, that quiet, almost rhythmic, performance of duty, which gradually chastens our moods, cleansing from them their fierce wildness and bringing them into keeping with our total pattern. Then our moods will fluctuate less often and certainly less radically. The pendulum, even if it still swings, will not swing so far.

Secondly, we must learn to transcend the moods which we cannot entirely elude. Some ebb and flow of feeling is inevitable. Some slight shifting of interest or attitude is apt to occur in the steadiest personality. A failure in our work combined with physical weariness may bring a cloud of depression and discouragement. A windy day, a letter from home, a personal misunderstanding are some of the many little things which play on our spirits and produce some variations in our feelings—possibly a touch of nostalgia or loneliness.

With the changed mood may come



strange impulses which we dare not heed—maybe to take a trip, or make an unwise purchase, or neglect some duty—impulses which will not pass one's common sense in sober moments. With the changed mood also may come the temptation to let our mood show. There is danger of appearing suddenly altered in our relationships with the people around us. According to the mood we may be abnormally [happy] and open or morose and close, generous to the point of profligacy or prudent to the point of stinginess. One day we may be optimistic, the next day pessimistic. Because our personalities cannot be relied upon for consistency, our friends do not know what to expect next. At first people are puzzled. Then they learn to say, "Just one of his moods"—with a hint of scorn. And they learn to be wary and apprehensive in all relationships with us, for they never quite know what mood they will find us in, or how soon our mood will change. . .

A mature, disciplined Christian has learned "to feel just as good when he feels bad as he does when he feels good"—in the Lord; *and* in the quiet, steady application of his energies to life.

Disciplined character never dissipates time and energy by catering to moodiness. "I don't feel like it" may at times express the plain truth, but the habitual use of this phrase is the trait of the weakling, not the strong man. When a college student explained that he had not attended the last class session because he "didn't feel like it," the professor said: "Young man, has it ever occurred to you that most of the world's work is done by people who 'don't feel like it?'"

### SPEECH

Regardless of how carefully controlled a person is at all other points, none can qualify for the high rating of a truly disciplined character whose tongue is not restrained by the bridle of prudence and directed by the reins of love. And this is scriptural. "If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain" (James 1:26 KJV). One may have a disciplined body, a disciplined mind, a disciplined will, even disciplined emotions, appetites, and habits, but a loose tongue betrays a fatal fault in the armor. The character is defective.

Some people pride themselves on their frankness. "I say what I think," they boast. So does the fool, according to the Bible: "A fool uttereth all his mind." Frankness is indeed a virtue when coupled with intelligent,

loving tact and discretion. But it becomes a sadistic vice when it is merely the unbridled eruptions of opinions without regard to times and places or human feelings. "There is that speaketh like the piercings of a sword: but the tongue of the wise is health" (Prov. 12:18 KJV). It often takes a far higher display of discipline to refrain from speaking than it does to speak. Forbearance is a Christian virtue, even as is frankness. . .

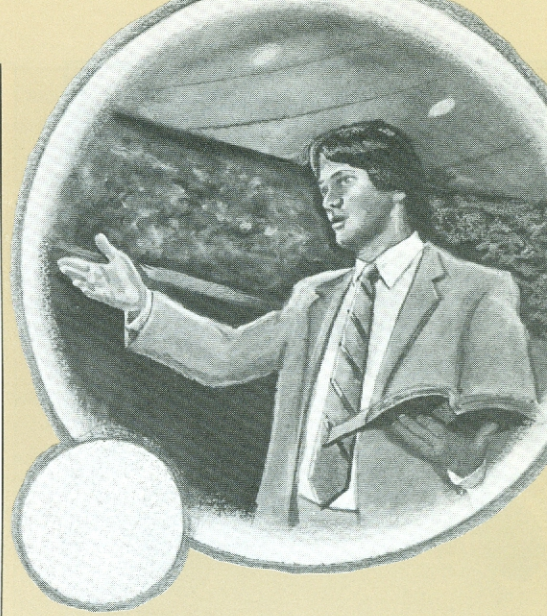
### PRIORITIES

Furthermore, a truly disciplined character has the ability to subordinate the lesser to the greater. Here is the problem of priorities—probably the most crucial problem of life. On its solution hang success or failure, improvement or degeneration, and in the larger sense, heaven or hell.

The battle here is not primarily to achieve a clear perception of what is more important, for all Christians acknowledge that God and Church should hold first place in our lives. Without hesitation we would concede that heaven is an infinitely richer goal than earthly position, that persons come before profits, that the culture of the soul and the mind is more to be desired than entertainment, that character is of far greater value than pleasure, that usefulness is better than idleness, that soul winning is life's crowning achievement, that righteousness is infinitely more satisfying than popularity. When confronted bluntly with these simple alternatives we know instantly which to approve. We would say, "Yes, these are the supreme values, and to realize them is my supreme goal." The problem therefore is not knowledge. The problem is actually giving first place to these values in practical daily living—and that is a problem primarily of character.

This involves ability to reject day by day that great army of possible activities which clamor for our precious energy but which would hamper the doing of more important things. All of us are confronted by a bewildering multiplicity of claims upon our time, talent, money, and loyalties. The claims are not only legion, but loud and insistent. To attempt to satisfy even half of them would result in frittering life away to nothingness. If life with us is to be fruitful and purposeful, we must heroically and decisively put the knife to most of the possible activities which could clutter every single day.

*Selection—selection—selection!* This is the law of life. We cannot join everything; therefore we must select. We cannot participate in every good cause; therefore we



No one can  
qualify for the  
high rating of  
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directed by the  
reins of love.

must select. We cannot give to everything; therefore we must select. We cannot go to every interesting concert or lecture or meeting; therefore we must select. We cannot read everything; therefore we must select.

To become well read is vastly more than reading; it is a matter of exclusion as well as inclusion. President Case of Boston University once said: "If you want to become a specialist in New Testament literature, you must say good-bye to the comics forever." And to a lot of other reading too! Whatever one's goal may be,





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it can be achieved only by the sacrifice of the lesser. This requires discipline of a high order.

Our stature as men and women, certainly our stature as Christians, will be determined exactly and entirely by our skill in selecting. If we give top priority to those pursuits which should have low priority, if we "major in minors," if we show a "first-rate dedication to second-rate causes," if we allow friends and impulse and the convenience of the moment to dictate our priorities, while we weakly drift with the tide of daily circumstances, we will be shabby, mediocre, and ineffective persons.

If we affirm certain priorities but fail to give them first place day by day; if we allow them to remain in the "never-never-land" of good intentions, without rigid adherence *right now*—the end result of character-zero will be just as sure. *Now* we must say "yes" to this and "no" to that. *Now* we must put first things first. And we must do it no matter how much more pleasant and appealing other things may be at the moment. It is reported that when a professional author said to Sir Winston Churchill that he couldn't write unless the "mood" came on him, the great statesman replied: "No! shut yourself in your study from nine to one and make yourself write. Prod yourself!—kick yourself!—it's the only way" . . .

#### ADJUSTMENT TO AUTHORITY

The final hallmark of the disciplined character is the ability to assimilate imposed discipline with grace and profit. It is by no means easy to subordinate natural initiative and self-assertion to legitimate authority. But it must be done if one expects maximum happiness and usefulness, and if one desires to achieve a mature character. Rebellion at times may be one's clear duty. But in most of life's normal relationships rebellion is stupid and destructive. Being a constitutional rebel is no ground for pride. Habitual rebellion is the cult of weaklings rather than the strong. It requires neither intelligence nor character to assert loudly, "No one can tell me what to do." But it requires both to submit to the inescapable and necessary constraints of society; and submit, not grudgingly, but graciously, with mature understanding and cheerful good will.

The unbroken colt is of little value. Whatever value he has is based on the assumption that he will not remain unbroken. The person who finds his true place and worth is the person who learns to wear the yoke. When a young man or woman intelligently learns that life is a bundle of relationships involving give as well as

take, subordination as well as domination, that moment is his or her value to society compounded many fold. This is exemplified first in the home, then in school, then in the church, then in one's vocation. Whether one is a lawyer, or doctor, or railroad engineer, or office clerk—no matter where or how one works, there are rules, or codes of ethics, or government regulations, or superior levels of authority in the form of employers, boards, managers, superintendents, *et cetera*, to which one must submit. If we are constantly kicking and chafing, we will be unhappy, to say the least, and in danger of becoming drifters. Insubordination, selfishness, misery, and uselessness are bedfellows.

The Christian, of course, must make sure he does not confuse such subordination to imposed discipline with blind, unthinking submission to the wishes and opinions of everyone about him. Proper submission to legitimate authority by no means extends to conformity to the world. Even that spirit of submission which Christian wives are to manifest toward unsaved husbands, and which is such an acid test of the wife's spiritual maturity, is not to be interpreted as requiring obedience to demands which violate her conscience as a Christian.

Then in the larger circles, such as in the world of fashion and custom, a fine independence of spirit, opinion, and practice is a noble thing. Discipline does not require that we be echoes only. The wise Christian must learn to submit to some yokes, but throw off others. If there must be dictation at all in matters of personal life and fashion, it had better come from the church than from the world. But even the church must not dictate too much. Christians must find their way between extreme non-conformity and extreme subjugation. They must learn to draw the line before proper assimilation of imposed discipline becomes extinction of private thinking and personal initiative. Insubordination is bad, but individuality is good.

It takes careful thinking to discriminate between distortion and normalcy in all of these facets of Christian discipline. But the essential fact is clear. Discipline is the mark of maturity. Without discipline the character will remain weak and infantile. □

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