



Faux Boxing After Punching Bags and Illusions

by Chris Tiegreen

My last fight was in third grade. Someone cut in front of me in line, so I smacked him. Considering the fact that he was twice my size, this was a very brave thing to do. And stupid. It didn't turn out well. I've been rather non-violent ever since.

Until recently, that is. I often use my lunch break to go to the gym and squeeze in a workout. One of my favorite exercise machines is positioned right in front of a large room with heavyweight punching bags in it. I've had a lot of time to stare at those bags and fantasize about whaling away at them. Recently, I quit fantasizing and put some gloves on.

It's been kind of addicting, actually. I've really enjoyed whacking at something so forcefully without risk of breaking anything or hurting anyone. I haven't lost a fight yet. Plus, it has helped me get in shape. I've received the benefits of boxing—strength, agility, and reduced stress, for instance—without assuming the costs—broken face bones, for instance. I'm a faux boxer and loving it.

I've noticed a parallel, however, with my spiritual life. I go through the exercises of Bible study, prayer, fellowship, mission, and witness, all while receiving great benefit from them. But I've realized that I sometimes avoid the costs. I do the training but don't step into the ring.

Training for What?

That works well in the physical world, but it's not a very good spiritual dynamic. Our exercises seems worthwhile, so we Christians do a lot of them. We want to fulfill all the things God has called us to do without actually getting our hands dirty. If someone else gets something out of

our spiritual disciplines, that's a bonus. But the main thing, we think, is for our exercises to benefit ourselves. We want to be well trained.

Perhaps that's why churches are always active places—a lot of people are over-extended in the services they volunteer—but rarely impact their communities in a radical way. We often do our ministry in the suburbs among the saved (either figuratively or literally), and though it may be very valid ministry, it doesn't always get us out of the gym. We're well trained without ever really stepping into the ring.

In a recent movie about office life, a group of workers spelled out their strategy. The aim, they said, was to look productive without actually being productive. (Real productivity, after all, could get them an undesired promotion with more responsibility.) If they always had a file folder in their hand and were on the move from one place to another, their superiors would always regard them as adequately industrious—in spite of the fact that there was nothing in the folder and they were just walking the halls. They were masters of illusion.

In some ways, Christians can be masters of illusion. We carry file folders but avoid the hard work.

Jesus told His disciples a parable, for example, that would send them into every corner of the world to invite people to the great banquet (Luke 14:15-24). He promised them that they would be hated and persecuted if they remained in His service (John 15:18-21). He commanded them to go extra miles and turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:38-42). But as good as we are about claiming the promises Jesus gave to His disciples, we don't often claim the hardships. We want the benefits of discipleship without ever really paying the costs. Like me at the gym, we want to punch a bag and not get hit.

Outside of the Ring

How do we do this? The ways are subtle. We endorse “friendship evangelism” over more direct approaches, and then never actually bring up the name of Jesus in our friendships. We give to the church, which then gives to an agency, which then gives to the poor, without ever really seeing the poor ourselves. We pray for a fellow believer for a few days of his or her crisis rather than following through for the entire span of it. We want to deeply affect our communities in the

name of Christ, but we're reluctant to say that name too loudly outside of church.

It's no coincidence that Paul uses a boxing illustration immediately after a discourse on his missions strategy. He writes of doing whatever it takes for the sake of the gospel in order to share in its blessings. He says he has become all things to all men in order that some might be saved. He is not aimless in his pursuit; he doesn't fight like a man beating the air (1 Corinthians 9:26). He has a purpose, and he regularly risks his life for it.

In other words, Paul got his hands dirty and took a lot of punches. He wasn't preoccupied with "self-actualization" as his ultimate goal; he was preoccupied with "kingdom-actualization" as God's ultimate goal. He trained not for the sake of training, but for the sake of pouring his life out as an offering to God.

We can do that too. It's scary; if I actually had to quit punching the bag and fight a real person, I'm not sure I could. But that's boxing, to which I have zero sense of calling. Spiritually, however, I'm called to quit punching the bag and get into the fight. That makes me nervous, but I have to do it. Jesus said so.

What is God telling you to do with your hands? Have you hidden yourself in the gym while the real fight rages outside? If so, put on your gloves and come out. God is calling. There's no lasting result from punching the bag. It's time to step into the ring.