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Spiritual Fitness in a Flabby Generation



*J*n 1970, a handful of runners participated in the first New York City Marathon, which was run on a four-loop course around Central Park. The marathon is now nearly fifty years old, and more than 50,000 runners participate annually. Meanwhile, in 2016, the ten largest marathons in the United States saw a total of over 200,000 finishers, and there were well over 700 marathons throughout the nation.

This is just one indication that physical fitness is a priority for many people as we continue in the twenty-first century. Business personnel stride toward their offices, briefcases in one hand and exercise bags in the other. Young mothers rollerblade with their youngsters on their backs or jog as they push along their little ones in three-wheeled strollers. Technical medical information, once the domain of our physicians, is now the subject matter of animated conversation in health-food stores and fashionable cafes that serve only that which

makes one lean and keen for physical exercise. Magazines abound on the subject and carry advertisements for such appealing products as the “energy optimizer” and the PowerBar, which are reputed to allow one to burn fat faster. If you want to maximize energy, minimize fatigue, and accelerate recovery, then you should opt for the scientifically based ultimate sports nutrition system. All these products are designed to help the average overweight and underexercised individual become serious about physical fitness.

EXERCISING FOR A REASON

As Christians, we should be at the front of this parade. After all, we know that our bodies are not to be abused, but to be fed and cared for. They are the dwelling place of God (1 Cor. 6:19), and it is through them that we give expression to our concrete service for God. Yet, historically, we do not have a strong track record in this area. Most local churches have included eating as a regular feature of their programs while at the same time either rejecting or neglecting, in practice, exercise as valid Christian activity.

We tend to be behind the curve in other ways as well. When aerobic exercise, aided by video, grabbed center stage in the '80s, Christians decided they needed to have their own version. So they created Praisercize to substitute for Jazzercise. The result? Christians who had a desire to get fit neglected the opportunity to plug in with their unbelieving friends, choosing instead to form

another holy huddle: bodies bouncing in time to worship songs. This allowed them to shun the secular and trivialize the sacred.

We should not be distancing ourselves from opportunities to get to know our unbelieving neighbors; instead, we should be seizing the chance to live in the world and let our light shine. That will result in maximum impact for the kingdom. We know that our bodies are like a tent that will one day be folded up when we leave for our permanent dwelling in heaven. Our unbelieving friends have no such hope. We know that the whole of creation is creaking and groaning in expectation of a new heaven and a new earth. Our friends believe that the here and now is all we have. So, while we run with them and share their commitment to physical exercise, there will always be a difference.

We are able to affirm with them that our lives are full of potential. They are powerful in their impact for good or ill. But we also know that our lives are passing. We can share this perspective with our neighbors and help them see the eternal significance of the aging process: that our lives are like the morning mist “that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (James 4:14).

We jog with our friends not to stave off advancing years but for the enjoyment of bodily exercise and to honor our Creator in the process. But the striking difference is that our lives are purchased. We realize that a healthy body with a sick soul is a tragic thing. For us, the ultimate issue is spiritual, not physical: “You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies” (1 Cor. 6:19–20).

INTEGRATING THE BODY AND THE SPIRIT

Eric Liddell had not compartmentalized his faith, as his statement in *Chariots of Fire* that it pleased God to make him fast gives evidence. He did not see athletics as secular and Bible study as Christian. He saw the whole of his life as under the control of God. For him and for us, that includes athletics, music, poetry, art—whatever we do as we exercise our gifts. When Paul told the Corinthians to run to win (1 Cor. 9:24), he was not referring to a literal footrace but to the whole of life: “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

THE TRAINING OF THE TRUE DISCIPLE

In 1 Corinthians 9:24–27, Paul argues from the lesser to the greater: if individuals are prepared to go into strict training and deprive themselves of justifiable enjoyments all for the sake of a crown of laurel leaves, how much more should we be concerned to run the race of the Christian life in such a way as to get an everlasting prize!

The Olympic athlete going for the gold must devote himself to years of preparation. This will involve:

1. *Diet.* The athlete does not ask merely whether the meal is nutritious but also whether it is allowed in his training program.
2. *Sleep.* The athlete is in bed when others party and out of bed to train when others sleep.

3. *Hardship*. The training is tough and demanding.
4. *Sacrifice*. Friendships back home cannot easily be developed and sustained.
5. *Commitment*. Financial, mental, emotional—total!

Our pursuit of the spiritual prize is to be no less passionate. We should run not aimlessly or halfheartedly, as though we signed up just to get a T-shirt, but as runners who look to receive the “Well done!” from our Lord and Master.

People will pay hard-earned cash for all kinds of gimmicks marketed as keys to the perfect body—always achieved with minimal effort. My current favorite is the Belly Burner, a belt that is to be worn around the waist to reduce unwanted fat simply as a result of being buckled on. In the spiritual realm, there have always been purveyors of the quick fix and the easy route to godliness. But such offers are useless. The Bible does not offer a shortcut to spiritual fitness.

THE ACTIVITY THAT HINDERS

The writer to the Hebrews urges an approach to spiritual progress that is aimed at the will rather than the emotions: “Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (Heb. 12:1).

The athlete must divest himself of all superfluous weight. Athletic wear is vastly different today from what

it was even a decade ago. The quest for the finest and the lightest is undertaken in order to increase the speed and efficiency of the athlete.

Once, in a small airport in Nairobi, I was shown the single-engine planes that were being used to fly supplies and personnel to the various missionaries in the region. To prepare the airplanes for service, all the extras had been removed. The upholstery on the seats, unnecessary paneling, and any luxury items that would have taken the place of something more vital had been cut away.

That is the way we should approach our Christian lives. Many things that are perfectly fine in and of themselves may hold us back from achieving spiritual fitness. We must be prepared to deal regularly with these hindrances. Some of them will surprise us. Our love of gardening, reading, or cycling may actually impede our spiritual progress. Our commitment to our families can also be a hindrance if it keeps us from worship, prayer, and witness. The words of Jesus put our involvement with our families into perspective: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26).

THE SIN THAT ENTANGLES

One of the key reasons for the flabbiness of our spiritual lives is that a generation of Christians is growing up with little awareness of the necessity of dealing with sin. There are sins to be rejected. These are the things that “so

easily entangle” us. We will not all be tripped up by the same things; the source of our temptations differs according to our personalities and circumstances. We must learn where our personal weaknesses lie—and once they are identified, we must be ruthless in dealing with them.

Earlier generations called this the “mortification of the flesh”—that is, pronouncing the death sentence upon sin and putting that sentence into daily effect by killing all that sets itself against God’s purpose in our lives.

How is this to be achieved? Not by a slavish observance of external rules. Paul writes, “Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence” (Col. 2:23). That is so because we need an internal mechanism if we are to “put off [the] old” and “put on the new” (Eph. 4:22–24). And that will come about only if we have been raised with Christ to newness of life. It is our union with Christ that makes the new life possible.

The power we need is the power that comes from the Lord, who works in our lives to enable us to do His good pleasure. Then we are responsible to work out what God by His Spirit is working.

ASSESSING OUR PROGRESS

The most obvious way to assess our progress is to test our lives against the plumb line of Scripture. We should not assume we are spiritually fit simply because we feel

we are. I may feel that on the strength of my jumping ability, I am ready for the Olympic Trials; however, when my vertical clearance of three feet is held up to the qualifying standard, I discover how far I have to go!

Several years back, I was given a rigorous assessment of my physical condition. I went through a battery of tests, submitted blood work, answered an extensive questionnaire, and then watched and waited as the results were fed into a computer. I was then given a report based on the findings. It was frank in commenting on even such matters as muscle mass and body fat! There were five main categories in which I was rated. We can also use them to assess our spiritual progress.

FUNCTIONAL CAPACITY AND HEART RATE

The first test was of my functional capacity—my aerobic activity and heartbeat. The doctors checked my resting heart rate and then monitored what happened in response to various levels of stress. They wanted to know how well I could sustain vigorous physical exercise, what effect exercise had upon my heart rate, and how long it took me to advance to the optimum rate for me to benefit from the activity. They used a treadmill and at regular intervals increased the pace and the angle of incline. It was no problem walking slowly on the flat, but quite a different matter running flat-out uphill.

In the spiritual realm, how well do you think the average church member would do in this area of assessment? Howard Hendricks once described the local

church as a football game: twenty-two people on the field, badly in need of a rest, and forty thousand in the stands, badly in need of exercise.¹ There is little doubt that the majority of the exercise necessary for the local church to function is engaged in by the minority of its members. As with so many exercise programs, people are often motivated by guilt to make staggering commitments, which they quickly discover they are unable or unwilling to sustain.

We need to learn where we are on this scale for two reasons. First, we need to know when to push ourselves. There is a level of activity that, although not harmful, is actually doing you very little good. It is fairly neutral. There are vast crowds who are apparently content to function at this level in our churches. They appear regularly on Sunday mornings to sit and listen, and then they disappear for another week before returning to repeat the process. Their aerobic function is flat. They do not enjoy the benefits of a good workout. They miss out on the privileges of service and fail to assume responsibilities that then fall to others who are possibly already overextended.

Second, we need to learn how to pace ourselves. In distance running, this is very important. If we are able to run ten miles at an average pace of seven minutes per mile, it is crucial that we don't begin to chase after someone who is able to sustain six-minute miles. We will be able to keep up for a while, but eventually we will be unable to stay the course—and our average time will reflect our mistake. So it is in the church: if we are to

run our race and play our part, we must always be “looking unto Jesus,” as Scripture puts it (Heb. 12:2 KJV), rather than looking at our brothers and sisters. Not that we do not derive strength and encouragement from their example; we do. But we are not called upon to play any part other than our own. We must learn how to accept our limitations as well as when to assume our responsibilities.

STATIC FLEXIBILITY

The next test measured my suppleness and agility—my stretching capacity and the ease with which I could perform a series of exercises. This is clearly a matter of significance when we think in terms of spiritual fitness. Many Christians score well in some of the other categories, but fail when it comes to flexibility.

The issue here is the ability to distinguish issues that truly matter from those that do not. We do not want to be flexible about moral and theological convictions. The great doctrines of the church regarding salvation, evangelism, and spiritual growth really matter. So, too, do the moral standards set forth in the Ten Commandments and elsewhere in the Bible. The suggestion, for instance, that the distinct roles God has given to men and women don't matter is not an example of flexibility, but of foolishness. It is wrong to compromise our doctrinal convictions in order to join hands with some who think we are too rigid.

But it is also wrong to be brittle about issues that are not foundational to the faith. Once, when I was a

child in Scotland, our church planned a day cruise down the River Clyde. A great crowd boarded the steamer on a Saturday morning as we set off on our voyage “doon the water,” as they say in Glasgow. In the midst of the usual banter and high-spirited conversation, I began to pick up a negative theme. The word that still stands out in my memory is *pertaineth*. The men were quoting the King James’s Deuteronomy 22:5—“The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man”—and the source of their agitation was a woman who had appeared on the boat wearing trousers. Now, despite the fact that the skirts of the other women were blowing in the breeze and revealing more than their ankles, this poor lady was being tried and convicted for her sensible attire. No, they did not throw her overboard like some female Jonah—but if a storm had come up, I have little doubt that some would have suggested that as a possible solution. What really made me wonder was how the men could adopt such an inflexible position when some of their own gender were on board walking around in kilts!

ENDURANCE

The third test measured my staying power: How many repetitions of an exercise could I complete without becoming fatigued? Endurance is a key indicator of spiritual fitness. Paul reminds the Philippian believers that he is confident “that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6). But what about the people who respond to

the gospel when they hear it preached, seem to make such a good beginning, and then fall away? They have been attending church, reading their Bibles, and praying—and then something happens, and we can't find them. The answer the Bible gives is that they are either “backslidden” or false professors.

The backslidden believer has been compared to a man on board a ship in the midst of high seas: he may be knocked on the deck time and time again by the waves, but he is never washed overboard. This is true to Christian experience, if we are honest. The hymn writer Robert Robinson put it well: “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, / Prone to leave the God I love.”² However, even though we may suffer temporary defeats in “a continual and irreconcilable war,”³ the Bible declares that “sin shall no longer be [our] master” (Rom. 6:14).

The instructions about restoration given in Galatians 6:1 and about winning back wanderers in James 5:19–20 speak to the reality of spiritual setbacks in the life of the honest believer. In addition, Ephesians 6:10–18 speaks of the armor needed for the battle: the believer needs to wear the “helmet of salvation” and think biblically about the struggles and difficulties he encounters. (John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* is rich with illustrative material when it comes to this.) As a result of grace, we have been saved from sin's penalty; one day we will be saved from sin's presence; in the meantime, we are being saved from sin's power.

The ground of our salvation is in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, but we should still give evidence of the work

of God's grace in our lives. How can we tell if someone is simply backslidden or is actually a false professor? As long as he continues in sin, it will be impossible to tell. Paul reminds Timothy, "The Lord knows those who are his. . . . Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness" (2 Tim. 2:19).

Some years ago, a friend gave me a photograph of a runner for my wall. Superimposed over the picture was the phrase, "The race is not always to the swift but to him who keeps on running." So it is that our endurance is a vital test of our spiritual fitness.

STRENGTH

I can tell you that my son was unimpressed when he saw how little weight his poor old dad was able to lift for the fourth test. My wife, for that matter, was not particularly impressed either. This is an area of physical fitness to which I need to pay attention. The doctors advised me as to how I might correct this deficit with a series of exercises.

The Christian faith is like a muscle: the more we exercise it, the more we build it, but when we neglect it, it atrophies. It is in recognizing our weakness that we discover the strength that God provides. It is God who keeps us strong to the end. King Uzziah of Judah had a dramatic rise to influence and significance, but failed at this most basic point: "He was marvelously helped until he became strong. But when he had become strong he grew proud, to his destruction" (2 Chron. 26:15–16 NRSV).

The Bible talks about becoming strong in good deeds (2 Thess. 2:17) and of having our hearts, hands, and knees strengthened in the cause of spiritual usefulness. We need strength in order to exercise our spiritual gifts (1 Peter 4:11). And we need, with Timothy, to be reminded to “be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 2:1).

All kinds of difficulties and trials will come our way as we go through life. We are not (as we shall see in chapter 6) exempt from pain, disease, or illness. The difference is that we are promised fresh supplies of strength as we wait upon the Lord. Annie Johnson Flint captured this well: “He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater, / . . . / for out of His infinite riches in Jesus / He giveth and giveth and giveth again.”⁴

SO NOW WHAT?

Well, the doctors gave me a copy of the report to take home and read. They expected that I would give heed to their recommendations. At the end of the day, it is not very complex: plenty of fresh air, regular exercise, and a sensible diet. That pattern works just fine for spiritual fitness too: prayer is the fresh air, witness and worship are the exercise, and a balanced intake of biblical instruction is the good diet.

Once when I was standing in the foyer of a local hotel waiting for a friend to join me for lunch, a sign caught my eye: “Fit for Life.” Here was a rack of brochures offering a variety of resources guaranteed to move one in

the direction of physical fitness. Sucking in my waist, I reached forward and picked up a few of the pamphlets. Since then I have purchased an exercise bike, used it rarely, and sold it. I have received a mountain bike as a gift, and despite the passing of time, it's still as good as new. I have purchased and borrowed a variety of books that provide the keys to health and fitness; they must be around somewhere! But I have discovered that when I plod around the city parks three or four times a week and make sensible choices about what I eat, this unspectacular regimen makes a significant difference in my physical fitness. Fitness is begun and maintained not on the basis of emotional surges, but on the basis of disciplined commitment—and, as the Beatles put it, “I get by with a little help from my friends.”

Spiritually, the issue is no different: an unspectacular commitment of the will to the right kind of intake and the right amount of output will make all the difference. The journey to spiritual fitness is not a series of 100-meter sprints but a cross-country run that lasts for the rest of your life. See you at the finish!