

Exercising Stewardship

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In the last article I spoke in-depth about the sinful motives which often lie behind our choices to over-eat or eat unhealthy foods. But a healthy body requires more than eating a balanced diet – it also requires a certain amount of exercise.

What prevents me from exercising enough?

I Don't Have Time

This has been one of my favourite excuses. Most of us recognize that good health requires a certain amount of exercise, of physical movement. It does not have to be overly-rigorous but the body is designed so that on a regular basis muscles need a little work-out, the heart needs to pump a little more, the blood needs to flow a little faster. Expert opinions vary as to how much is enough but the accepted range seems to be that even as little as 20-30 minutes per day of walking, running, swimming, biking, skating or the like will make a huge improvement in our health. But I haven't got time!

That's what we tell ourselves when work commitments swarm our desks and our minds. It's not that we are lazy or trying to slough off our obligations but we just can't shake the impression that there are so many more important obligations ahead of exercise. Wrong. Taking care of our God-given bodies for the honour of the Lord is no less important than fulfilling the duties of our daily job or functioning as a parent in our home. God gave us all these obligations and expects us to meet them all. Thus we have to make time. And if we see it as a priority, time can always be made – just look at your other top priorities and how time always gets made for them.

The other thing is, when we take the time to exercise our bodies we will soon find more energy and ability to fulfill our other tasks. It will actually help us function better and be more productive in those other areas. What we need to do is repent from a care-less attitude toward the body God has given and ask the Lord for a renewed commitment to stewardship over His creation – me!

I Don't Enjoy it

This excuse applies to many things we resist by nature: obedience to authority, paying taxes, budgeting my finances so as to stay in the black to name a few. What we have to realize is that behind this excuse is the god of our personal pleasure which we've run into already. This god teaches us to choose and do only those things we like to do and leave the rest aside. The Bible teaches us to choose and do only those things which God likes, to bend our wills to His and to find pleasure in pleasing Him, not ourselves. If, "I don't enjoy it" is our excuse, once again repentance is the solution because it pleases God when we manage our bodies in a healthy manner.

Many things that are good for us we do not enjoy – at first. But like most of them, once we give exercise a try, we will find it is better than we thought. Try something easy and work your way up. A short swim, a ten minute walk around the block, a bike-ride to the post-office and back. Exercise helps strengthen muscles, build lung capacity, keep down excess weight and, once the pattern has taken hold, will leave you with a fit feeling.

Ongoing Renewal

It's important in all this talk of sins of the heart to remember that repentance is an ongoing thing in our lives. The Lord Jesus has broken the power of sin so that it no longer is our master but until He returns, sin remains a mighty influence in our lives. Every day is a battle. We should not expect to beat our particular struggle in a snap – or in a day or a week or a month. There will be stops and starts, failures and successes, requiring daily repentance and daily renewal by the Holy Spirit. But don't give up! Don't get discouraged. As we live out of God's grace in this area of life and as the Lord Jesus works His benefits in us, a new pattern of healthy eating and exercising will emerge but for most of us it will be a fight (sometimes easier, sometimes harder) for the rest of our lives. We fight as victors but fight we must.

Lifestyle vs. Diet

So, now that I've repented from the desires of my heart, what next? Practically speaking, how do I lose weight so as to become healthier and exercise stewardship over God's creation?

I recognize that there are oodles of ways to lose weight through diets of various sorts. In our home over the years we've tried all the main-line ones and not a few of the fringe ones. Pounds can fall off, even quite quickly but in every case it proved to be temporary. Ask around and you'll discover that this is the experience of most others. The reason is simple: a diet is designed as a temporary tool to take off weight, not as a permanent tool to keep the weight off. Usually we abandon the diet because we find it too hard to maintain but even if we stick with it, eventually we have to quit it and return to some kind of "normal" eating. No one can lose weight forever. But at the point of leaving the diet is precisely when the weight begins to come back on simply because we return to our old habits. We haven't learned new ones. A diet by itself does not address the heart issues nor does it establish a new, permanent routine of healthy living.

Diets have their place, particularly for those with certain medical conditions. And diets can help

get a person's weight down faster. But better still is, from the beginning, to embark on a slow-but-steady overall lifestyle change that is designed to last. With the help of a doctor or some good nutrition advice, go through your current eating habits and assess what you eat, how much, and how often. Do the same for exercise. Then formulate a new plan for both, making incremental changes over time, changes which will be permanent.

Slow but Sure

The idea is that we slowly reduce our food intake (adjusting also its quality, i.e. healthier foods) and slowly increase our exercise output. It will be a learning process, figuring out what to trim out of the daily menu (and what to exchange) and what to add to the exercise routine. It will take time to find a new rhythm to your daily habits that is effective and sustainable. To lose weight we will need to burn off more energy than we take in but once we have lost the weight we need to lose (again, it's worthwhile to consult a doctor about a weight range target), then it will not be as difficult to switch over to maintenance mode. What will be required is a comparatively slight adjustment to the amount of exercise and/or food intake so that we begin to maintain our new weight (instead of losing more).

Of course, based on what we've discovered in the first two articles, all of these new choices and new patterns need to be rooted in the daily (or better: constant!) prayer that God will give me the grace to honour Him this day in caring for and nurturing the body He gave me.

The Long-Term

What I am advocating here is a long-term approach to glorifying God through the stewardship of your body. Diets often have a short-term goal of losing so many pounds in so many weeks. And behind that goal often lies other reasons: I have to lose 15 pounds before I'll be seen in my bathing suit; I must lose 20 pounds to fit into my suit or dress. But if our focus every day is to show respect to our Creator and please Him, then we'll enjoy "success" every day, regardless of whether we've dropped a certain number of pounds or can fit into a certain piece of clothing. The fruit of a lighter, healthier body is a blessing to be sought but our main goal remains to treat our body in a responsible, stewardly manner each day in order to honour God. This we can do as we depend on Christ's blood for forgiveness and on His Spirit for renewal and transformation.

Such a goal helps us to avoid short-term anxiety when things don't change fast enough, according to our initial expectations. A "change your life-style" approach will be slower than a diet but it will be longer lasting too. We should free ourselves from the pressure (found all around us) to "get into shape" in a matter of months to a more realistic time-frame of two-to-three years. The spiritual battles take time to get on top of and learning new ways of eating and exercising take time too. Of course, there should be results for our efforts earlier and along the way but – depending on how far we have to go – the end goal of arriving at a body weight and health regimen that is healthy and sustainable could take quite a while. That's not a problem or a discouragement if our driving thought each day is to honour God.

Helping Hearts

One of the greatest blessings we've found (my wife and I) is to undertake this life-style change with the encouragement and help of a friend. It could be your spouse or a close friend or maybe a small group of friends who have similar struggles. But to have someone who understands the struggles – spiritual and physical – someone who will pray for you and even with you for the Lord's help, someone to go along with you and even make these same changes in their own lives, a partner who can encourage you and vice-versa, that ally is a precious blessing from the Lord and not to be underestimated. Ecclesiastes 4:9 says it well, "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work; if one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up." You can help each other in the fight, you can be each-other's accountability partner, you can phone and text each other for encouragement and even admonition. When one falls, the other is there to pick up and gently restore.

In this respect, our local church families can be a huge help. Why not start an "Encouragement Club" or something like it in your local church, for people struggling with issues like this and needing the boost of support that a brother or sister in Christ can provide? A weekly gathering to hear each other, open Scripture together to address the spiritual struggles, to pray with and for each other – would that not be a blessing for us and glorifying to our Saviour? After meeting for 30 minutes the group could walk for 30 minutes and immediately put into practice the godly principles that have been discussed.

Food, health, and our bodies are good gifts from God and together we can help each other make changes so that the Giver is honoured in how we handle the gifts.

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