

Sermon for Sunday, May 13, 2012
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Caring for our Bodies
Gen 2:7, Rom 1:24-25, 6:12-13, 12:1; 1 Cor 6:12-13, 1 Tim 4:7b-8

Gen. 2:7 the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

Rom. 1:24-25 Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator — who is forever praised. Amen.

6:12-13 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness.

12:1 Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship.

1 Cor 6:12-13 "Everything is permissible for me" - but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible for me" - but I will not be mastered by anything. "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food"- but God will destroy them both. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.

1Tim. 4:7 Train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.

Caring for our Bodies

This month we consider what the Lord says about self-care. Care for our integrity, our emotions, minds and body. Then care for the world – our neighbors, our society. Today: What does Scripture say about care for the body?

The sad truth is our culture and our work push us away from physical health. God created mankind as a body-soul unity, but for many of us, work is all mind. We talk on the phone or stare at a computer all day. How can we stay energetic? We feel weary; we're tempted to reach for caffeine or a sugary snack. At the end of the day, our nerves are jangly and many adults think of taking a pill or drinking something to relax.

Christians, the church, tend to neglect the body. There are virtually no songs or confessions about the human body, outside a few about Jesus' bodily resurrection. We think of the body as something we escape when we go to heaven. Perhaps we neglect thought about the body because we think it's unspiritual. Why would God be concerned about food, sleep, kissing, hugging, and grooming? It's unspiritual.

Yet we know that many of our idols, the places we turn for self-soothing, are physical – food, sleep, sex, alcohol, thrill sports. If we turn to bodily gods for comfort, bodily life is important spiritually. So let's see what the Bible says about the body in God's original plan, then what is wrong and how it can be healed.

1. The body at creation – God's good design

In the beginning, God created mankind as a body-soul unity. We are not like angels – minds without bodies. Nor are we like animals – bodies without spiritual self-awareness. Animals have awareness, but not meditative self-awareness. As humans we have eternity in our hearts; birds do not.

Genesis 2:7 says, "the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." Since the moment of creation, the body and heart; the body and the mind are interdependent. The body is so essential that it can stand for the whole person. Paul says, "Offer your bodies to God as living sacrifices." So you offer God your body, you offer mind too – the whole self. When Jesus says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength" he means love me with all your faculties, including your body and its strength.

At creation, our bodies were good. Whether Adam and Eve had navels, whether they rippled with muscle or were smooth, we don't know. We do know that God designed their bodies for this world. They were in tune with the world.

In the beginning God gave Adam and Eve creation mandates. Pre-fall ordinances dictated the structures that govern human life. They are marriage and family, work, and rest with worship. They tell us how to relate to God and the world. God designed our bodies for these tasks, these mandates.

- God designed us to marry, to have children, to care for them. He designed fathers to protect and mothers to nurture children together.
- He gave us work – to fill the earth and subdue it, exercising authority over all.
- He ordered a Sabbath for rest and worship.

God designed the human body for success in work. He designed women to become mothers of children, caring for them with their husbands. Bodies even rest and worship. With our bodies we sing or kneel in worship. As Paul says, "Offer... your body to [God] as instruments of righteousness."

2. Body upon the fall - our disappointing experience

The body is now liable to disease, decay, death. It's also the home of unruly desires. Not all, but many of our physical desires are sinful. To be precise, we desire things that are good in themselves, but we want them in the wrong place and time or want too much. Work, sleep, food and sex are good in themselves. But we do too much – too much work, sleep, food and drink, and so on.

On the other hand, we also do too little with our bodies. Some of us drift along with our culture, leading a sedentary life, staring at a screen or talking on the phone all day. God didn't design us for this, so we feel lethargic. To rouse ourselves, we want a stimulant. Instead of talking a ten minute walking break, we go for the coffee or donuts to wake up, feel alive.

The food industry is quite willing to make a profit catering to the desire for stimulating food. They will give us exactly what we want, if it's profitable. Indeed, they will engineer their food – the portions of fat, sugar and salt – that make you want more. They'll make it go down easily, so you want more. We can eat lots of French fries, potato chips and donuts because they have no texture and it doesn't register to the body that it's eating much.

The same impulse desire for stimulation leads people to tobacco, especially nicotine, an immensely addictive stimulant. It also leads to drugs, alcohol abuse. We gain weight because there is sweet food everywhere, all the time. We read about the frightening growth in obesity and diabetes. There is also a counter-trend toward hyper fitness. Here men and women train to get lean and mean as young adults and into their 50s and 60s. What shall we say?

Let me speak personally. I'm 58. I stay in contact with about twenty professors and large-church pastors, roughly my age, to discuss the issues of life, to stay faithful together. They are good and godly men. As we pursue faithful life, we sometimes discuss the care and the decline of our bodies.

My friends are talented, gospel-loving men who work hard at important but stressful jobs. As we grow older, our bodies either serve us well or let us down. Some work out and weigh roughly what we did in college. Others don't care for their bodies and have suffered the results. One had a heart attack. One succumbed to drug addiction and defeated it, but after several years and at great cost.

One never exercised. He gained weight, got diabetes. His body lost its ability to fight disease and he very nearly died from a mundane illness because he compromised his immune system. He is a great pastor, compassionate, wise, and hard-working. Somehow he decided bodily care and exercise are unspiritual – they take him away from God's service. And he almost died from a runaway cold at 59.

When we were together, Jack told his story. Some chided him: "Jack, God didn't give you a body by accident. You are more than a brain attached to vocal cords. Your neglect of your body almost killed you. You're essentially saying God made a mistake when he created us as physical and spiritual beings who live best when body and spirit are in harmony."

Others in this group exercise regularly, even daily. They run, go to the gym, lift weights, play sports in competitive leagues. One professor said it well: "Our work is essentially sedentary, often stressful. Some men our age sit at a desk all day. They hardly move, except to get coffee or to walk to class. They don't look healthy and I see their energy and academic production dropping. Their minds aren't as sharp as they were because they're neglecting their bodies."

This man runs four miles in about twenty-five minutes each morning. He lifts weights and chops the wood to heat his home. Is he wise, a good steward? Or does he project his rare abilities onto others? Is care for the body narcissistic, a neglect of greater tasks?

My friends say: 1) "I feel guilty when I exercise. It takes me from God's work. I can't forsake my people and calling for the sake of self-centered, solitary activity. 2) "God made me with a mind and a body. My culture makes it hard to find physical health. Therefore I must discipline myself to care for my body. I feel better and serve the Lord better. I believe it's how God designed us to live."

Who is right? Whole-hearted dedication to God's work sounds noble. Yet if God created us with bodies, it seems that we should care for our bodies. Who wants to be a brain on a stick? And if that's our view, we should practice it.

Of course, the exercisers who care for their bodies, have problems too. Some slip into narcissistic worship of the body. Some suffer from devotion to extended youth. At worst, we begin to block the principal that all flesh is liable to death.

Then there is what I call exercise bingeing. When our schedule denies us time to exercise during the week, we go for hours to make up for it and then feel sore and exhausted the next day. I have done that far too often.

We need a theology of the body, even in its fallenness. Let's start with the Lord Jesus, who took a body like ours - not especially beautiful or resistant to disease. As man in flesh, he was liable to hunger, thirst, exhaustion, bleeding, death. Jesus' incarnation ennobles bodily life, mundane life on earth.

The Bible teaches that every human faculty is both good and fallen – mind, emotions, will, body. We don't ignore the problems of the body – as if all is good and any physical breakdown is a shock. But neither do we despair and hope simply to escape the body and its pains. The Greeks made every sort of mistake.

Plato said the body is the prison house of the soul. Therefore death is a welcome escape from its limitations and pains. For Buddhism, extinction is good.

By contrast, Neoplatonists said the body is the house of the soul. Therefore treat it well, nicely. The extreme here is Hedonism: "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we will die." Enjoy bodily life while you can.

Epicureans saw the danger in that and said, "Eat, drink, be merry in moderation, lest you die. Tomorrow pursue moderate pleasure, again.' They accepted self-denial if it led to greater pleasure, long term. That's godless life management. Are you an Epicurean – managing pleasure? Or maybe a Stoic?

Stoics shared an interest in the pleasure/pain calculus, but were less optimistic. Instead of seeking pleasure they avoided pain. This too is management. What about you? Do you seek great pleasure? Modest pleasure? Pain management? The Lord offers more.

3. The Body Restored - some healing now

A flood of biblical information affirms the restoration of the body life and joy within covenant life. For example the law commands God's people to feast in his presence: Deuteronomy 14:26 tells Israel to buy food and drink, "Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the LORD your God and rejoice."

The blessings of marriage, parenthood and physical love are common in Old Testament narrative. God gives men and women to each other in marriage and affection. Proverbs praises romantic love: "May you rejoice in the wife of your youth. May you ever be captivated [literally drunk] by her love." Solomon says, "a good wife is a gift from Yahweh" – something no man can find by calculation.¹

In the New Testament Jesus restored bodies through his miracles: the lame walk, the blind see, the deaf hear. Paul calls the body our house or home (2 Cor 5:1-10). A more lasting house is coming – where? I ask you again to banish bad theology: Not floating in clouds like angels, but here, in a perfected creation. Until then, we should live faithfully in the body. A walk through Romans describes that:

¹ Von Rad, Wisdom, 101.

First, pagans disgrace their bodies and displease God by indulging their "sinful desires" and dishonorable passions (Rom. 1:24-26). Sin once reigned in our mortal bodies, but now, Paul says, "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but yield yourselves to God as men who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness" (Rom 6:12-13).

Rather because of our redemption and through God's mercy, Paul says, "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service." The body represents the whole person, in daily life, in the acts of hands, feet, back. If we give the body, we give the whole person. Our body, our hands, represent our strength. Paul could say, "Serve God with 'heart' or 'spirit' but he wants to be concrete. Our bodies are instruments, power tools, which we should present to God.

Jesus came as a whole person to redeem our whole person. He spoke, from his mind, to renew our minds. He acted with passion, to heal our passions. He came in a body to restore our bodies. This should begin now, however imperfectly and partially. Today we groan "as we await our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom 8:23). On that day, he completes our restoration and grants us perfected bodies. Therefore, we present our bodies to God.

4. Living faithfully in the body – care for it today

The Bible has a theology or philosophy of the body, but also answers some of our specific questions. For example, how important is fitness? Answer: Bodily training has value, but spiritual training has more. Paul says, "while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way" (1 Tim. 4:8).

The phrase "bodily training" features language from competitive sports, training, the gymnasium. Paul often compared the faith to running, wrestling, boxing; he understood sports. He sounds like he loves sports. So he says *bodily training has value*, but training in godliness has more value.

If getting in shape feels like a losing battle to you, you may be relieved. It's not the most important thing! But it is important; it's morally good to care for the body, to exercise: To walk, run, go to the gym. Manual labor, gardening, yard care, sports are all good ways to stay strong. Especially in this sedentary age, we need to keep heart and lungs, arms and legs and torso fit.

Some of you love to exercise. I commend you. The Lord is pleased. But some are addicted to sports and exercise. It may even be an idol. You have an idol when you think, "Without this, life is meaningless. If I can't do this, what would I live for?" Paul says: Bodily discipline is of "some value," but not "supreme value."

Let me ask disciples: How many hours do you devote each week to training and exercise? How many are spent in reading the Bible, in prayer, worship, discipleship? I propose that the time spent in Scripture, worship, prayer, self-examination should at least compare to sports time. Why? Bodily discipline is good and has promise for this life. Spiritual discipline has promise now and for life to come.

Others need encouragement to care for their body. I get it. Your body hurts, you're disappointed in yourself, you don't know where to start. Paul said, "I discipline my body and make it my slave lest I be disqualified" (1 Cor 9:27). He makes it a servant of his goals. Again, we want to "offer our bodies to God as instruments of righteousness." We start to do that when we strengthen our bodies.

Research shows that exercise gives us energy, eases sleep, releases tension, and keeps the mind sharp. As with everything, we can start small where we are. Walk around the block twice and go from there.

May I state the obvious: we should not willingly take in anything that we know will hurt our body. Heroin and meth are obvious. Consider alcohol. Yes, God gave wine to make the heart glad (Psa 104). Yes, Jesus created wine at the wedding, but the Bible names the danger of drunkenness about seventy-five times, including staggering. Self-control is part of the fruit of the Spirit.

Nurture your hope for future glory

Paul describes the resurrection of the dead in 1 Cor 15:42-53: "What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory... sown in weakness, raised in power... The trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality."

When Jesus returns, he will raise all flesh. He will judge us according to our deeds and our loves. If we believe Jesus is Lord and Savior, if we believe the Father raised him after his death, if we long to see him then we shall see him and be renewed – free from sin and heirs of a new body, perfectly suited to new life.

Jesus' resurrection body was like, yet unlike his "ordinary" body. The disciples recognized him, but not right away. Something had changed. He had scars from the crucifixion and he ate food, but he could pass through walls. We can expect a body like his: Powerful, immune from disease, death, decay, or deformity. We will walk, touch, eat, worship and play. We will be at the height of our powers, full of energy.²

Until then, let us celebrate the gifts of bodily life - feasts and play

Sin obscures the truth, but the Lord created our bodies, he has begun to restore our bodies and he will redeem our bodies. At present, he commands us to stop indulging sinful and self-destructive impulses or lusts, so it can seem that He wants to restrain the body, but Scripture says God is for the body.

The early church had some pagan ideas about bodily life, including food and sex. The influence by Greco-Roman culture led to loose codes of conduct. The Corinthians had a slogan, "Food for the belly and the belly for food." That is God gave us a body with appetites. The body wants food and water so we eat and drink. Appetites must be satisfied. The word "belly" is code for endless selfish appetites – the desire to live for pleasure. Paul said of the godless, "Their god is their belly." That is, they live for their appetites, pleasure (Phil 3:19).

Paul knows we need to satisfy the body's desire for food, drink, sleep. But we don't live to indulge every appetite. There is a proper use for everything, so Paul agrees that "All things are lawful." But, he continues, not all are beneficial or advantageous: "All things are lawful, but I will not be mastered by

² . J.B. Russell, History of Heaven, 1998, 119.

anything." The original has a play on words. Rough paraphrase: "All things are under my power, but I will not be overpowered by anything."

So we use our bodies wisely. We discipline them, disciple our desires. We should never enslave ourselves to appetites for food, alcohol, drugs, or thrills. There is no advantage to it.

Nonetheless, Paul says, "The Lord is for the body." The Lord is for the body and so are we. We restrain abuses so we can enjoy proper uses. Solomon blesses legitimate longing for romance that a man and a woman have to kiss, embrace, and wed. The incarnation and resurrection of Jesus prove that God is for the body. The home of sin is also the home of restoration.

We see this in many ways. God wove playfulness into the fabric of creation: children, animals, even adults. He ordains feasts as part of worship. The pleasures of a breeze on the skin, cool water on a hot day, sleeping beside our beloved. Psalm 139 says, "I will praise you [Lord] for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." So let's care for our own bodies, set examples for each other, encourage each other in faithfulness.

So we thank God for his creation. Moreover, we praise Jesus for taking a body so he could redeem us – heart, soul, mind, and bodily strength. He bore death in his body. Our bodies will yet die. But by faith, by union with the God-man Jesus, that death will last a season. Let us yield to his call. May we repent when our body's desires go astray. May we never despair when our bodies fail us. Let us trust the Lord and seek his holistic redemption – hearts, minds, bodies.