

Faith with Fitness

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Abstract

Connecting mentally and physically

Both bodies and souls are important to the Christian.

We know that God created humans with these two interconnected parts, and that the health (or sickness) of one can influence the health (or sickness) of the other. God made us and redeems us as whole persons, and it's a Christian distinctive to care about it all — not just the soul, but the soul and body. But valuable as both parts are, the apostle Paul goes a step further to help us understand the priority. The central passage on this topic is in his first letter to Timothy. Exhorting him to be “a good servant of Christ Jesus,” Paul writes,

[T]rain yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. (1 Timothy 4:7–9)

Many commentators point out that “bodily training” is an athletic allusion similar to [1 Corinthians 9:25](#). Paul's point there and here are identical: he contrasts the superior benefits of spiritual training with the limited benefits of physical training. *Spiritual* training is for the *imperishable* wreath and procures value in the present life *and in the one to come*.

Both kinds of training are important, but spiritual training — godliness — is most important.

Help to Keep Caring

Now, at this point, let me be clear (or perhaps confess): For whatever incentives the Christian value of the body brings toward exercise, Paul's words here about godliness can tend to mute them, at least for me. So yes, it is good to do physical exercise because God cares about the body. But actually getting to the exercise — actually picking ourselves up to devote the time toward bodily training — is made even more difficult when we know that, at best, physical exercise is only second best. Our question becomes:

How do we bring ourselves to consistently do something that is difficult when we know there is something else we could be doing which the Bible says is explicitly more beneficial?

Workouts take time. And every workout is the product of a choice to work out rather than, say, read your Bible. One way or another, as over-simplified as this might come across, we must come to grips with the fact that we are expending strenuous effort into a “second-rate” enterprise. And that, at least to me, presents a problem for continued motivation.

Therefore, it seems that the best sustainable solution for continued motivation in physical exercise is to target spiritual benefits *in the actual event of the working out*.

So what are they?

Our Mental Posture

So now I have to step away from generalities to refer to some personal trial and error. One quick answer to our problem, it might seem, is podcasts. “If you want spiritual benefits while exercising,” maybe you’re thinking, “just listen to good preaching on iTunes.” While I have no doubt this is helpful for some people, I’d venture to say that it isn’t for most, not if you’re exerting, at least in some points, peak physical effort. My past attempts to listen to podcasts typically led to a deflated workout and a distracted mind. Trying to get that last rep to the cadence of Keller’s voice just didn’t push me. Furthermore, I came away from amazing content having only given it a superficial hearing (which I think could be more detrimental than not listening at all).

So beyond podcasts, beyond stretching ourselves too thin by simultaneously overwhelming multiple faculties, *I’d advocate that the spiritual benefit of exercise comes through our mental posture at the moment of our most intense physical exertion.*

This gets down to the details of what is going through our minds when we step beyond what’s comfortable to do what’s necessary. This is when we go from easy to difficult.

And that’s where grace comes in.

Grace and Effort

The reality under everything in our lives is the grace of God in Jesus. *What do we have that we did not receive?* (1 Corinthians 4:7). Physical exercise is no different. In fact, perhaps the best way to start any workout is to recognize this in prayer. One practice is to remember three simple truths in the form of thanksgiving.

- First, *thank you, God, for my body that, though imperfect, works now and will be resurrected one day.*
- Second, *thank you for the common grace behind such a facility like this that understands the importance of the body* (admittedly, we do the YMCA, which may make this prayer easier than if at other gyms).
- Third, *thank you for grace even when things are hard, and help me, in the toughest moments of this workout, to wrestle gravity in the strength you supply.*

This last prayer characterizes the mental approach which yields the spiritual benefits of physical exercise. It has to do with grace and effort.

Human exertion, at some level, is necessary in just about all our waking life, but it is especially felt in exercise. Consider the scenario of exercise when it’s most challenging. Maybe it’s that last uphill mile, or the final three reps of the shoulder press. To be sure, we feel the finiteness of our resources in those moments. And we will absolutely go somewhere to find the fuel that will help us finish. There are ten reps here, and you just barely pushed up the seventh. How will you get the next three? You must find motivation somewhere.

Without even trying to, the mind, like a starved dog on the scent of a bone, starts digging, frantically trying to find something to hold before our failing bodies as a worthy incentive. The easiest fallbacks are typically self-absorbed: because we want to look a certain way, or because we don’t want to whimp out, or because we used to be this strong, or because we plan to write an article about all this. The mind, working in tandem with the body, will default somewhere like this if it’s not occupied somewhere else.

3x10s for Godliness

But what if we train our minds, our souls, to default on grace? What if, in that moment of intense exertion, our motivation became the demonstration of God's grace in our sweating, straining, desperate effort? We can't lift that bar. We can't breathe on our own. We didn't create ourselves. And yet, we will lift that bar. We will breathe. We are God's creatures. *By his grace.*

And when we lift that bar — the very moment of lifting that bar — we are bearing witness to our person that God's grace mobilizes us *to do things*. Everything in that moment is given to us, and yet, we are working. Grace *and* effort. When we set our minds on the demonstration of God's grace, in the actual experience of his grace behind our effort, the gym becomes a spiritual training compound.

Exercise becomes an experience, a practice field, that can be transposed into weightier matters. The more and more we prove to ourselves the presence of God's grace in our work, the more and more we will be equipped, for the sake of our sanctification, *to press in on that grace* whenever and wherever the going gets tough. And this becomes our goal. This transposition becomes the fuel for that final push.

We can do hard work, knowing that we are counted righteous by faith, not works, and that we're commanded to work out our salvation in God's strength (Romans 4:5; Philippians 2:12). We can walk away after a good hour of physical exercise, thirsty and heart pounding, learning to say about that, and then other things: *I just worked hard, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me* (1 Corinthians 15:10).

Bodily training, after all, is of some value, but godliness is of value in every way. So let's aim for both, at the same time.

June 13, 2026

faith / fitness

It started out as the 4 pillars of healthy living. They were areas that we focused on in accountability groups. I've written posts about the importance of faith, food, exercise, and water on your healthy living journey. But today I want to break down my Faith and Fitness Framework™ in some simple steps that you can apply to your daily life. This is the same framework we use in the Faith and Fitness Support and Accountability Community. Each day there is an accountability post that allows the members to check in. We base the check-ins on the four areas. Some women simply report in with a number (1, 2, 3, 4); others indicate which area they did well in and which they struggled with.

As stated above, the Faith and Fitness Framework™ is made up of 4 pillars: Faith, Food, Exercise, Water. But I'd like you to look at it not as a table with 4 legs but perhaps a tripod that has a leg down the center. Why? Because the most important pillar of the Faith and Fitness Framework™ is Faith.

This space, this framework, my books, everything that I share must first lead you to faith. Rather than "faith and fitness," the tag line could easily be "faith then fitness," or "faith first fitness," or "faith driven fitness."

The result is to live fit and free.

What is that? Living a healthy life that leads to freedom, not restriction and judgement. It's a lifestyle where you make decisions to honor your body not to punish your body.

Let's take a look at each area. But first, I want you to note that you get to determine what the exact application of each pillar will look like for you.

Faith

Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. 1 Corinthians 10:31 (NKJV)

“Do all for the glory of God.” God must be the driving force of our actions. Therefore, we need to be in His Word to know His will.

If you do nothing else with your day, I urge you to spend time with the Lord. Without that firm foundation, nothing else matters.

What the faith pillar looks like when you apply the Faith and Fitness Framework™

Time with the Lord – in prayer, Bible study, quiet.

Food

This is likely the most difficult for most people for a couple of reasons: 1.) The Faith and Fitness Framework™ is not an eating plan. I won't tell you to “eat this, not that,” give you a food list, or meal plan. 2.) Life. Schedules.

I've tried all the diets, and I've learned that restriction always leads to a binge. I've also learned that if we don't learn a way to eat that satisfies us, we'll always be thinking about food.

The way food works in the Faith and Fitness Framework™ requires us to get in tune with our own body. We start by becoming a detective of how our body responds to certain foods. We become more aware of satisfaction factor and when that happens before we feel stuffed.

Women desiring a better relationship with her body have more than likely tried many diets. She knows the basics of “healthy eating,” but she's not been able to apply it in a way that leads to freedom.

Everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible, but not everything builds up. 1 Corinthians 10:23 (CSB)

What this pillar looks like when you apply the Faith and Fitness Framework™

Eating to satisfaction not feeling stuffed

Choosing foods that you like and that also make you feel good

#Moderation365

Exercise

I'm a firm believer in the benefits of movement. But too many people think that exercise requires a gym membership or an hour a day.

Exercise can be a ten-minute walk. It can be a yoga flow or a stretching session.

What this pillar looks like when you apply the Faith and Fitness Framework™

Regular movement

Movement that you enjoy

Water

It sounds so simple and yet drinking adequate water daily can make a huge difference in overall health.

Several years ago, I taught a step aerobics class at our local gym. I had a participant replace her daily Mountain Dew with water. She lost ten pounds in a month!

Not only does water give you a sense of fullness and acts as a natural detoxifier for your body, it makes up the majority of your body composition.

What people don't realize is that water doesn't make you “hold water.” We retain water when we don't drink enough because our body is afraid we won't get anymore. We need water to survive.

How this pillar looks when you apply it to the Faith and Fitness Framework™

Drink more water than anything else throughout the day

Rule of thumb – drink half your body weight in ounces of water each day

How to apply the faith and fitness framework™ to your daily life so you can start living fit and free.

#faithandfitness #fitandfree

In summary

Faith and Fitness Framework™ – It's the 4 areas to focus on to honor the body God has entrusted to you so that you are free to do the work He's called you to do.

Faith – The foundation for everything. It must be a daily habit. Prayer. Bible reading. Praise music. Quiet time with the Lord.

Food – Eat in a way that satisfies and properly fuels your body...for strength, energy, nourishment, and enjoyment.

Exercise – Move regularly in a way that you enjoy. Choose movement that will facilitate strength, stamina, and flexibility.

Water – Drink mostly water to properly hydrate your body for proper organ function and for effective digestion.