

The Value of Physical Fitness for the Christian

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In any discussion about Christians and physical fitness, we should begin with Paul's comparison in 1 Timothy 4:7-8—"On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come." Elsewhere Paul similarly indicates that whereas athletes in physical training exercise self-control for the purpose of winning a *perishable* prize, Christians discipline themselves spiritually for an *imperishable* prize (1 Cor. 9:25). Physical exercise has its place of importance, but it should not be our highest aim or first priority. The Lord desires other attributes more zealously in His people than their strength or physical fitness. "He does not delight in the strength of the horse; He does not take pleasure in the legs of a man [referring to strength or stamina]. The Lord favors those who fear Him, those who wait for His lovingkindness" (Ps. 147:10-11).



So, now that we have our priorities straight, let's think about the comparatively small profit of physical fitness for the Christian. Here are four good reasons for Christians to develop and maintain a generally healthy lifestyle by eating right and engaging in regular exercise.

Good Stewardship—God has given you a body to use and enjoy during your time in this life. It will not last forever, but as with anything else God entrusts to us as stewards (for example: money, possessions, time), you should take good care of your body. Some people have disabling accidents or unavoidable medical conditions that limit the use or longevity of their body, but to recklessly damage or disable your body through neglect or abuse is not to act as a good steward. Furthermore, our bodies were designed by God for physical activity. Muscles, organs, and even bones deteriorate rapidly when subjected to excessive inactivity. With all of the effort-saving devices available to us, most of us are not compelled to engage in the level of daily activity our bodies need. Therefore we need to insert an exercise routine (even just some regular moderate walking) if we are to move as much as our body needs to stay healthy.

Learning Self-control—As Paul said in 1 Timothy 4 and 1 Corinthians 9, the most valuable exercise of self-control is not that related to physical exercise, but that which produces godliness. Nevertheless, the self-control required in

achieving health and physical fitness can help you establish better habits in spiritual areas as well. For example, establishing self-discipline in exercise and eating can teach you principles that will help you become more self-disciplined in Bible reading and prayer. Training yourself to persevere while enduring the physical challenges of exercise can help you to learn to persevere while enduring the spiritual difficulties of the Christian life. The self-control required to deny yourself too much unhealthy food or the temptation to sleep in rather than working out can help you become more effective in resisting temptations to sin. It's all a matter of learning to bring your body into subjection, making it your slave rather than your master.

Staying Ready for Usefulness—Your present role in serving God may not require physical fitness. What He has you doing for Him right now may not require strength or stamina. But what if an opportunity arose for you to serve in a more demanding setting? What if you were just the right person to go somewhere physically challenging—all except for your physical *inability* to endure the hardships? Wouldn't it be better to stay ready even if never needed, than to be needed but not ready?

Loving Others—Your body is the instrument you use to love and serve others. Loving others by meeting needs often requires a bit of physical exertion. Not everyone is cut out for every task, and there are often less-demanding ways the physically weaker can serve while others do the "heavy lifting." But wouldn't it be a shame if you were truly needed, but were unable to serve because you had neglected your body? Wouldn't it be better to maintain a reasonable degree of physical fitness so that you were not unnecessarily hindered in loving others? Also, wouldn't it be more loving to your family and your church to maintain your physical vigor well into your latter years so that others are not prematurely burdened with your convalescent care? Of course, this cannot always be avoided. In God's providence, strokes and accidents and dementia sometimes happen even to physically fit younger people. But why not love your family and your church by doing your best to be a healthy and active senior?

No matter how well you have done up to this point, no matter how many years of inactivity, neglect, or even abuse have already gone by, for most of us it's not too late to make a change. I was 49 years old before I put away the junk food and started exercising. So what's hindering you from making a change—*today*?