

The book cover features a central illustration of a white statue of a person in a dynamic, athletic pose, possibly a runner or a person performing a yoga-like movement. The statue is set against a background of overlapping, colorful geometric shapes: a large orange semi-circle, a blue triangle, a green triangle, and a yellow triangle. The statue's torso and legs are decorated with a blue and white pattern resembling a fan or a stylized sunburst. The statue's right arm is raised, holding a white disc with concentric circles. The entire composition is framed by a white, angular border that cuts across the image. The background of the cover is a textured, light gray with soft, white, cloud-like shapes at the bottom.

DAVID  
MATHIS

A  
LITTLE  
THEOLOGY  
OF  
EXERCISE

ENJOYING  
CHRIST IN  
BODY AND SOUL

“I’ve spent a lifetime in athletics but never thought this deeply about the glory of God in training the body, mind, and soul. David’s vision (and Scripture’s!) of a vigorous life to the glory of God truly inspires, and I’ll walk into the gym differently this week.”

**Rick Barnes**, Head Basketball Coach, University of Tennessee

“In *A Little Theology of Exercise*, David Mathis has written a unique and timely book to help Christians think spiritually about exercise in a sedentary age. Specifically, he answers the question ‘How can the joy of exercise serve joy in God?’ David skillfully avoids the pitfalls of either idolizing or ignoring the body by presenting a theology of the body from creation to fall to redemption to glorification. And so he presents a short theological manual packed with godly motivations for the use of the body to the glory of God. This book will challenge you, but it will also change the way you think about spiritual pleasure and physical exercise.”

**Gavin Peacock**, former professional footballer; Locum Pastor, Bethersden Baptist Church, UK; author, *A Greater Glory: From Pitch to Pulpit*

“‘Little’ is putting it lightly. David Mathis’s *A Little Theology of Exercise* is a work for such a time as this. Despite spending more on being healthy than ever before, Americans live in a largely sedentary culture and face a growing obesity epidemic. Given that context, his work strikes a necessary balance between convicting admonitions and instructive exhortations. Filled with biblical truths that highlight the remarkably designed human body with its God-given capacity for exercise, the book provides an excellent theological framework by which Christians should engage in exercise. I am especially grateful for David’s enlightening, embodied approach to exercise, one that recognizes the value of both soul and body health. Whether you exercise five days a week or five days a year, if you desire to glorify God with your life—with your body—I highly recommend his book.”

**Lainey Greer**, Founder, Your Body Matters; author, *Embodied Holiness: The Biblical Call to Bodily Care*

“David Mathis offers a biblical vision for physical exercise that reveals the deep connection between body and soul. Rather than viewing exercise as a secular activity or a means of self-improvement, Mathis reframes it as a God-given gift that can enhance joy in Christ to the glory of God. Whether you’re an athlete or someone simply seeking a more faithful approach to fitness, this book will challenge and encourage you.”

**Jeremy Treat**, Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Reality LA,  
Los Angeles, California; Professor of Theology, Biola University;  
author, *The Crucified King*; *Seek First*; *The Atonement*; and *Renewal in Christ*

“There is a growing obsession on social media with health matters. Apparently, everyone has a health tip! There’s a type of idolatry and legalism that creeps into such discussions. The solution isn’t to avoid these worthwhile topics but to look at them as Christians should: We are body-souls; and any discussion that considers exercise, for example, should remember that fact. David Mathis has offered a highly useful book that highlights the importance of exercise, but he does not forget that we are made in the image of God, created for his service, and most useful as we give our whole person to the Lord’s work.”

**Mark Jones**, Senior Minister, Faith Reformed Presbyterian Church,  
Vancouver, British Columbia

“The importance of regular exercise is an oft-overlooked topic in the Christian community. In *A Little Theology of Exercise*, David Mathis provides a theologically rich yet accessible look at how bodily stewardship serves our joy in God. This brief and inviting book will benefit those who already enjoy regular exercise as well as those who need a little motivation to get moving. I look forward to giving it to the men and women who take my fitness classes!”

**Sharonda Cooper**, Bible teacher; elite fitness instructor

“David Mathis has written this wonderfully helpful book about the vital role of using our bodies in our enjoyment of God. I loved reading his biblically grounded thinking that insightfully shows that the body is a marvelous gift from God but, like all his gifts, is a means to the much greater end of glorifying God through delighting in him. This book will make you want to go for a run and worship God as you do.”

**K. Erik Thoennes**, Professor of Theology, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University; Pastor, Grace Evangelical Free Church, La Mirada, California

“Mathis opens *A Little Theology of Exercise* with 1 Corinthians 6:19–20: ‘You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.’ He then dives deep into this truth, clarifying what our culture has obscured. God amazingly designed our bodies not for self-worship but for his glory—not to remain sedentary but to be vigorously used in service to him. Mathis urges us to be wise stewards of our bodies by staying fit, which enables us to serve God more fervently, find greater delight in him, and glorify him through our bodies. Read this book! Its rich theology will transform your perspective on exercising and help you find joy in offering your body as a living sacrifice to God.”

**Bobby Scott**, Pastor of Discipleship, Community of Faith Bible Church, South Gate, California; Council Member, The Gospel Coalition; former track and field all-American

“At the core of every Christian’s perspective on physical health and fitness is a motive that either seeks transformation or opts for the status quo. In this important book, David Mathis makes the biblical and gospel-centered case for joyfully pursuing a fit and balanced life for its physical, mental, and spiritual benefits—for the glory of God. In a Christian culture that rightly rejects the extremes of a sedentary or idolatrous life, we find in this Scripture-saturated work a joyful rationale for doing hard things as a means to meeting the needs of others, enjoying God more deeply, and experiencing the joy God has on offer.”

**David Bush**, Founder, Fit for the King; author, *The Body Gospel* and *Fit for the King: Your Health and God’s Purpose for Your Life*

*A Little Theology of Exercise*



# A Little Theology of Exercise

*Enjoying Christ in Body and Soul*

David Mathis

 **CROSSWAY®**  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS



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*To John and Jon  
Founders,  
Desiring God*

*You are not your own,  
for you were bought with a price.  
So glorify God in your body.*

I CORINTHIANS 6:19–20

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## Preface

“MAN HAS HELD THREE VIEWS OF HIS BODY,” writes C. S. Lewis in his 1960 book *The Four Loves*.

First there is that of those ascetic Pagans who called it the prison or the “tomb” of the soul, and [others] to whom it was a “sack of dung,” food for worms, filthy, shameful, a source of nothing but temptation to bad men and humiliation to good ones. Then there are the Neo-Pagans . . . , the nudists and the sufferers from Dark Gods, to whom the body is glorious. But thirdly we have the view which St. Francis expressed by calling his body “Brother Ass.”<sup>1</sup>

Lewis then comments, “All three may be . . . defensible; but give me St. Francis for my money.” He continues, “Ass

1 C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (1960; repr., Harcourt Brace, 1988), 100–101.

is exquisitely right because no one in his senses can either revere or hate a donkey. It is a useful, sturdy, lazy, obstinate, patient, lovable and infuriating beast; deserving now a stick and now a carrot; both pathetically and absurdly beautiful. So the body.”<sup>2</sup>

Just as Lewis saw these three enduring views of the human body in his day, so too we see them today. We have our ascetic (or digital) pagans, who find their physical body a prison that holds them back. But now screens and virtual reality create new possibilities. Life, for many, in the tech age has become shockingly sedentary, planted endlessly in front of screens and living increasingly through their devices.

Meanwhile, those same screens display image after image of meticulously sculpted and enhanced human bodies—these are Lewis’s neo-pagans (half-nudists, at least) for whom the body is glorious or *must be glorious*, no matter the cost, however much dieting and exercise and surgery it requires.

Yet third, we have perhaps the road least traveled: Saint Francis’s road. Lewis’s road. And the road I aim to travel in this book. We might even call this the road of Christian Hedonists—*Christian* Hedonists. Today’s non-Christian hedonists may divide themselves up, more or less, between sedentary,

2 Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 101.

digital paganism and semi-exhibitionist neo-paganism, while we *Christian* Hedonists are gladly left with “Brother Ass.”

I recognize the word *ass* is arresting. It accents our natural, sinful laziness and obstinance—the “infuriating beast” deserving the stick, as Lewis says. But let’s not miss the affection and warmth in the word *brother*. Lewis does not say “brother” lightly. Just as Jesus doesn’t say “brother” lightly. And I don’t repeat “brother” lightly. *Brother* accents the usefulness, sturdiness, patience, and lovability of these bodies that are “absurdly beautiful.” And even here, in recognizing their beauty, Lewis steers a careful course between genuine appreciation and holy reverence—our bodies are not to be worshiped but acknowledged and enjoyed as, in the words of the psalmist, “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14).

## **We Christian Hedonists**

I am a pastor and Christian teacher. I am not a personal trainer. I am not a dietician. In fact, I have hardly anything to say in this book about diet—except a general plug for moderation and a broad warning about drinking sugar. But as a Christian Hedonist—as one persuaded that *God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him*—I have a serious interest in how the human body serves not only natural joy but also spiritual joy. And I hope, as a Christian Hedonist,



that the approach of this book will land on the reader far more like a carrot than a stick.<sup>3</sup>

Question 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) asks, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” The answer is this: “That I am not my own, but belong—*body and soul*, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.”<sup>4</sup> Much could be said about how the life of the soul affects the life of the body, and this will be implicit at some places in the following study. But in this short book, I’d like to focus on *stewarding the body*—and in particular moving the body, exercising and exerting the body, even training and conditioning the body—in service of the soul (our joy), for the praise of God (his glory), and for the good of others (love).

My hope is that this book will be useful to a wide swath of Christians—not just those already convinced of the opportunity physical exercise can be to serve spiritual life. My prayer is that Christians who are living largely sedentary lives, who are ready to consider some new habits, and who want to harness the possibilities in bodily exertion to assist their

3 For more on “Christian Hedonism,” see John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, rev. ed. (Crossway, 2025), or in summary form, John Piper, *The Dangerous Duty of Delight: The Glorified God and the Satisfied Soul* (Multnomah, 2001), or visit [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org).

4 “The Heidelberg Catechism,” in *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms: A Reader’s Edition*, ed. Chad Van Dixhoorn (Crossway, 2022), 291 (emphasis added).

## PREFACE

joy in God will find this short study accessible and inspiring. I hope it will help you, in the context of our sedentary age, to realize and leverage the potential of your body in the service of Christian joy. I want you to freshly appreciate the gift and wonder of our bodies, designed by God for movement and exertion, as aids in our call to glorify him and as assistants (rather than obstacles) to life-transforming joy in Christ and acts of love toward others.

I also hope that Christians who are already active in physical fitness but often tempted by shallow and sinful motivations will find here the (little) theology to undergird, inform, and shape their bodily training. I pray that those who are already dedicated to exercise but driven by worldly and selfish reasons would find solid, reinforcing biblical reasons to modestly train their bodies in service to their calling as Christians to be happy in God and glorify him in their bodies.

*David Mathis*

SAINT PAUL, MINNESOTA



## Introduction

# Joy Set Before Us

WHY WOULD A PASTOR, of all people, write a book about exercise?

In short, I want to help people know and enjoy Jesus more and, so, make much of him in the world as he deserves. As a pastor, that often means that I'm speaking and writing about Jesus himself,<sup>1</sup> or teaching portions of the Bible, or commending various *spiritual* disciplines (which I call “habits of grace”<sup>2</sup>). And God made us embodied creatures. The *physical* body has a vital part to play in our spiritual and holistic health and God-honoring joy. In my adult life, especially in

1 For instance, David Mathis, *Rich Wounds: The Countless Treasures of the Life, Death, and Triumph of Jesus* (Good Book, 2022).

2 David Mathis, *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus Through the Spiritual Disciplines* (Crossway, 2016).

the last decade, I've found that *physical exercise serves my soul*, and I'm eager to commend that to you to serve your growth "in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18).

To be clear, my appreciation for exercise and "bodily training" (1 Tim. 4:8) is not as an end in itself. One of the reasons I take exercise seriously, rather than neglecting it, is precisely because of how it serves the joy, strength, and stability of my soul.

The issue of deliberate physical exercise, in service of the Christian life, may be more pressing in our times than for saints of old who lived in far less sedentary societies. The industrial revolution, modern travel and labor-saving technologies, and (in particular) the invention of the television—all alongside the modern diet—have brought significant changes in recent generations. In my own lifetime, the advent of the personal computer in the 1980s, the internet in the 1990s, and the smartphone in 2007 has left many of us still coming to grips with how sedentary human life can be if we are conformed to the pattern of our world. But this has not always been so. God made us to move and to do so vigorously. And he wired our brains to leverage vigorous movement, reward it, and reinforce it. Exercise makes happier humans, and God made humans to be happy—in him—with bodily movement being an assistant, rather than an adversary, to Christ-exalting joy.

## Embracing Our Humanity

Even those of us with fulltime jobs and small children typically have enough time for the real nonnegotiables of life: daily Bible meditation and prayer, weekly corporate worship, midweek Christian fellowship, generous family time, reasonable work hours, adequate sleep, *and modest exercise*.

I had a regular pattern of exercise through much of my twenties but let my habits lapse after getting married and having twin boys three years later. In the summer of 2015, I got serious about exercise again. It had been about seven years of general sedentariness. Strenuous physical activity had become far more the exception than the rule. On a June evening, while walking with my wife, I complained about not having enough time to exercise. She didn't buy it. It was a matter of my priorities, she said. I had enough time in the morning for both Bible and exercise before the kids were up. And besides, I had no business filling my schedule with so many commitments if basic human needs like sleep and exercise were continually delinquent.

So I finally owned up to the fact that if I was not getting some minimal regular exercise, I must be making some bad choices and trying to do too many things, or I must be investing my time unwisely. In a new way, I was coming to grips

with my humanity. For me, making exercise a priority has had a lot to do with embracing my finitude and making time for the basics of both being a Christian (through personal and corporate habits of grace) and being human, including adequate sleep and moderate exercise.

### **Wonder of Movement**

In the 2009 bestseller *Born to Run*, journalist Christopher McDougall marvels at the human anatomy and physiology and at our ability for endurance running.<sup>3</sup> But humans are not just born to run. While animals tend to excel at one or two main abilities, God built humans for countless capacities, with the ability to adapt, specialize, and excel in many ways.

According to Harvard psychiatrist John Ratey, humans are “the Swiss Army knives of motion”:

The research on this shows no favoritism, no sweet spot according to any one activity, no real specialization, and this result is counter to what’s found with any other species. For other species, one can make a categorical statement like “born to gallop,” but for humans, no. Born to run?

<sup>3</sup> Christopher McDougall, *Born to Run: A Hidden Tribe, Superathletes, and the Greatest Race the World Has Never Seen* (Knopf, 2009).

Yes indeed, but also born for doing other activities as well. Humans are the Swiss Army knives of motion.<sup>4</sup>

In what other species do you see a variety that stretches from linebackers to ballerinas? Average humans like me tend to think of professional athletes and dancers as flukes of nature, born with something the rest of us were not. As we sit in front of the television or in a stadium or theater seat, it sure seems in that moment like we could never do what they're doing. *I could never move my body like that. I never could have been nearly that strong or fast.*

But what if we pause for a minute and think about how different our lives have been for the last twenty years, compared to these professionals? Or thirty years. Or forty. We were born far more alike than we tend to think. These masters of movement who capture our attention were not born with the ability to do gymnastics, or jump high into the air and land on ice skates, or hit a hundred-mile-per-hour fastball.

4 John Ratey, *Go Wild: Free Your Body and Mind from the Afflictions of Civilization* (Little and Brown, 2014), 26. Elsewhere, he adds, "The human body is unique among the bodies of our close relatives, our fellow mammals, in not having a sweet spot, in having muscles and a supporting skeletal system designed for a whole variety of movements." Ratey, 121.



Rather, the human body in its divine design is capable of developing remarkable skills through practice and conditioning. However much we tend to overestimate what our bodies can do in the short run, we typically underestimate what they can do in the long run. Of course, what so markedly sets us apart from the animal kingdom, even according to evolutionary biologists, is the human brain. There is nothing else in our gloriously created world that comes close to being as advanced, complex, and astounding as the human brain.

I mention the brain in particular because of the part it plays in the wonder of human movement. The size, complexity, and power of the human brain correlate with our ability to move like no other creature. It can be amazing to watch humans move. As Ratey observes, “Sedentary as we may be, we still pay enormous amounts of money and invest enormous amounts of cultural capital in watching people move, obviously so with sports but consider, too, movement like ballet. What other species could accomplish this level of variation and control in pure movement?”<sup>5</sup>

### **Beautiful Feet and Hands**

When’s the last time you paused to ponder the wonder of feet? Not just their oddness and elegance but the fact that we

5 Ratey, *Go Wild*, 101.

have them at all. Unlike plants and trees, we are not tethered in place by roots. We are not left to wait for the world to come to us. Rather, we can go into the world—indeed, Jesus commissioned us to do so (Matt. 28:19–20)—to step, walk, run, dance, and move. According to McDougall, “Leonardo da Vinci considered the human foot, with its fantastic weight-suspension system comprising one quarter of all the bones in the human body, ‘a masterpiece of engineering and a work of art.’”<sup>6</sup>

Irish physical therapist Gerard Hartmann, who works with some of the world’s finest distance runners, says,

Blueprint your feet, and you’ll find a marvel that engineers have been trying to match for centuries. Your foot’s centerpiece is the arch, the greatest weight-bearing design ever created. The beauty of any arch is the way it gets stronger under stress; the harder you push down, the tighter its parts mesh. . . . Buttressing the foot’s arch from all sides is a high-tensile web of twenty-six bones, thirty-three joints, twelve rubbery tendons, and eighteen muscles, all stretching and flexing like an earthquake-resistant suspension bridge.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> McDougall, *Born to Run*, 156.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in McDougall, *Born to Run*, 176–77.

What about the wonder of your human hands? Isaac Newton supposedly said, “In the absence of any other proof, the thumb alone would convince me of God’s existence.”<sup>8</sup> Not only do we move about the world on our feet and legs but also reach, extend, grasp, and touch with our arms and hands. We use them to work, lift, tear, cut, build, push, and pull.

No material entity in God’s created world is more complex, fascinating, marvelous, and valuable than human life, which God designed to specially reflect him in his world. The reason your body and brain are so marvelous, so fearfully and wonderfully made, is to point to God—even as, in this fallen world, “our outer self is wasting away” (2 Cor. 4:16). One day, sin and death will be no more, and we will have a glorified resurrection body. Then we will experience, beyond imagination, the full, unhindered wonder of feet and hands and movement to the glory of God.

### **Sedentary Times**

Alongside breathing, eating, thinking, feeling, and speaking, one of the great fundamentals of human life is movement. Bodily activity is so basic, so obvious, often so assumed,

<sup>8</sup> The quotation is often attributed to Newton, but I am unable to identify its source.

that we easily overlook what a veritable superpower it is. Yet movement is one vital aspect of our enduring human nature that our present age threatens to undermine.

Few today would disagree that we are living in a sedentary age compared to generations and centuries before us. One great downside of the exponential burst of modern technologies is that our bodies and their movement seem to matter less and less. As a fellow pastor insightfully observes, “Much of what we call ‘technology’ does not actually help us to become more productive at our work but rather does our work for us. While claiming to help us become more efficient, this sort of technology actually trains us to do little or nothing at all.”<sup>9</sup>

We have cars, and we walk far less. We have machines and other labor-saving devices, and so we use our hands less. We have screens, and we move less. Added to that, in our prosperity and decadence, food and (sugar-saturated) drinks are available to us like never before.<sup>10</sup>

9 Steven Wedgworth, “Your Family Is the Frontlines: Three Ways to Recover the Christian Home,” *Desiring God*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.desiringgod.org/>.

10 According to the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, now more than 40 percent of US adults are considered obese. For a short treatment of sugar (honey) from a biblical standpoint, see David Mathis, “What Is Sweeter Than Honey? A Little Theology of Sugar,” *Desiring God*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.desiringgod.org/>.

Unless we break the cycle, we will consume more, move our bodies less, and then find it ever harder to lift our own weight off the couch when some physical opportunity or request beckons. Simply walking upstairs becomes a mental barrier. Taking out the trash feels like more than a chore. Doing work around the house seems daunting.

We still *move*, of course—we must. But many of us have been conditioned by this present age and our own lazy impulses to *move as little as possible*. Now, economy of bodily movement has long been a survival instinct, in God's good design, to protect against starvation, but few reading this book are under any near threat of starvation today. Our need is not for conserving calories but for putting to good use the abundance of calories we consume (almost) without thinking.

To the degree that our default is to move as little as possible—rather than to move freely, eagerly, and enjoyably—we undermine or inhibit some essential dynamics in the Christian life. As Christians, we cannot content ourselves with taking our bearings from our sedentary society. Our modern excesses are not just of human concern but Christian concern.

### **Bodies in Motion in the Bible**

Regular human movement has been assumed throughout history. For instance, consider what we gather about the

normalcy of bodily movement and activity from the Old and New Testaments. In one sense, we might simply observe, “They had no planes, trains, and automobiles.” Adam and Eve walked out of the garden when they sinned and spent the rest of their lives working the ground with their own hands and whatever tools they were able to produce. Noah and his sons built an ark as big as a football field with their own hands and sweat. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were nomads—that is, they moved around and walked, herding sheep for their livelihood. So, too, Joseph and his brothers walked. Pharaoh put the Israelites to hard labor. Moses, no matter how comfortable his first forty years may have been, spent his last eighty on his feet. Which brings us to the wilderness generation, when God’s people *wandered*, that is, moved about the desert for forty years.

In the time of the judges, we are confronted with two clearly negative examples of obesity: Eglon (Judg. 3:17, 22) and Eli (1 Sam. 4:18). Fat food was a blessing; fat men were not. King David, on the other hand, is represented as a kind of physical specimen. He killed Goliath *in his youth*, and he manifestly was no weak man. He was a man of war—skilled and fearsome—and according to Psalm 18 was not only deadly with projectiles but also able to outrun other men with his speed, agility, and strength.

Inactivity in Scripture spells disaster, in time, for nations and generations, as in Deuteronomy 31:20: “When I have brought them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I swore to give to their fathers, and they have eaten and are full and grown fat, they will turn to other gods and serve them, and despise me and break my covenant” (so also Deut. 32:15; Jer. 5:28). And when such national and literal fatness led to the destruction of the holy city by a foreign army, serving as the instrument of God’s covenant justice, then the people walked on their own two feet some seven hundred miles around the desert to Babylon. And seventy years later, when Cyrus the Persian issued his decree that the temple could be rebuilt, that may have sounded like great news for believing exiles, but only a fraction of them actually took up the seven-hundred-mile journey to move back home.

### **In the Body, for the Soul**

Fast forward to the first century and consider how much Jesus walked. It’s over one hundred miles from Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee to Jerusalem. That’s not a long trip in a car or bus. But on foot? It makes for five to ten travel days—that is, walking all or most of the day. Then ponder the missionary journeys of the apostle Paul!

All this to say, one of the major differences between our times and biblical times, very practically, relates to our technologies. One of the main manifestations of that is the general sedentariness of our lives compared to theirs. And if the above summary of biblical bodily exertion makes you tired just thinking about it, consider how the orientation of our modern age on physical activity, compared to the preindustrial world, affects how we think about *doing good* for others—because doing good typically requires bodily exertion in some form. Good comes into being through working, not wishing. And apart from that, the sedentariness of our bodies is not disconnected but deeply integrated with our inner person—with our minds, hearts, and wills.

This may be one of the most surprising aspects of this study. This book is not only (or mainly) about the body but also the soul. Our bodies and souls are profoundly and mysteriously connected. What we do with one can deeply affect the other. We train our souls through conditioning our bodies, and what we do with our souls can greatly affect our bodies. This is why, as a pastor, I've written this book *on exercise* for Christians: because what we do (and don't do) with our bodies does affect our faith, our minds, our joys (with the whole range of our emotions), and our wills (whether we're willing and eager to exert our bodies to do others good).



Countless unbelievers come to experience and enjoy the many benefits of exercise but do not adore Jesus or have the Holy Spirit. My concern is *how a Christian might exercise* differently than an unbeliever. How do we experience God's natural gift of physical exercise in such a way that we profit spiritually?

More to the point, how does the joy of exercise serve joy in God? The answer begins with theology and becomes very practical in our motivations and approach to working out. My burden is to persuade Christians of the joy and value of modest bodily training and to encourage them not merely to *factor in God* to our exercise but to *put him at the center*.

Another way to put it would be to ask, *How do I make exercise holy?* To that we turn in part 1.

## PART 1

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# MOVE THE BODY

### *Making Exercise Christian*

How do I make exercise holy?

We could approach this little theology of exercise from many angles. We could simply begin with what the Christian Scriptures teach about our bodies and then seek to make our own personal applications in that light. Or another angle is to ask the personal questions, How do I make my exercise holy? How do I make it count for God? For eternity? For what matters most? How do I exercise with God, not self, at the center?

For me, and I hope for you too, it's not enough to enjoy fitness and just happen to be a Christian. So we turn first to 1 Timothy 4, where we find some important truths about our bodies. However, we will not (yet) go where you might be expecting—to 4:8 about “bodily training.” Rather, here's 1 Timothy 4:1–5:

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

First, mark the anti-body orientation of the false teachers Paul opposes. They are suspicious of, to the point of opposing, basic bodily pleasures that God designed. These false teachers forbid marriage (implying the marriage bed) and certain foods. Paul does not mention *physical exercise*, but clearly the full embrace of bodily existence is in view. And 4:8 is only a

breath away with its mention of “bodily training.” So this is a fitting place and context to draw out some applications to exercise—that is, “voluntary physical activity undertaken for the sake of health and fitness.”<sup>1</sup>

Paul writes in 1 Timothy 4:4–5 that “everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.” I’ll say more in part 2 about thanksgiving, but first let’s ponder how life in the body is “made holy.” How is the marriage bed made holy, and how are eating and drinking made holy? Paul says, “by the word of God and prayer.”

Now, what does that mean? How do God’s word and prayer “make holy” various bodily acts for which God designed and made us? In chapter 1, we will focus on “God’s word” for our bodies (and exercise), and in chapter 2, we will turn to prayer—and very practically how we might respond in

1 Daniel Lieberman, *Exercised: Why Something We Never Evolved to Do Is Healthy and Rewarding* (Pantheon, 2021), xii. Lieberman observes that “until recently only great kings and queens could enjoy taking it easy whenever they wanted. Today in a bizarre reversal of the human condition, voluntary physical activity for the sake of health—a.k.a. exercise—has become a privilege for the privileged. In addition to being surrounded by laborsaving devices, billions of people have jobs and commutes that prevent them from being physically active by requiring them to sit for most of the day.” Lieberman, 47–48.

prayer to what God tells us about our bodies. Then, in part 2 (chapters 3–7), we will explore various Christian motivations and incentives for exercise.

So what does God's word say about our bodies and their exercise?

# His Word

## *What God Says About Our Bodies*

GOD MADE US not only to *live* our lives but to *consecrate* them. That is, he does not intend that we humans float mindlessly and unconscientiously through our daily acts but that we *make them holy*, that we set them apart from the pattern and assumptions of the unbelieving world, that we live differently than those in rebellion against God. In 1 Timothy 4:5, Paul says this making holy, this sanctifying—this consecrating of normal, human, bodily life—happens *by the word of God and prayer*. What does that mean?

*The word of God* is what God says, what he has spoken, what he has breathed out in the Scriptures for us to know about our bodies. In this chapter, which is the longest in this

short book, we'll look at what God says about our bodies. Our exercise and physical exertions will not be holy if we view our bodies in ways that are not true, in subtle and overt lies not in accord with what God has revealed (and our society is teeming with such halftruths).

*Prayer*, then, is our response back to God in light of what he has said. We'll turn to how we might pray for our exercise in chapter 2.

Two questions now lie before us in this chapter and the next: (1) What does God say, in his word, about our bodies? What God-designed and God-revealed truths *about our bodies* inform the Christian life and our movement and exercise? And (2) how do we make bodily exertions and training holy through prayer by speaking back to God in light of what he has revealed?

So, what does God say about our bodies?

## His Story, Our Bodies

For those in Christ, we learn to view our bodies in layers—layers of a redemptive story. Our bodies are not only fearfully and wonderfully complex but also vitally *en-storied*. Understanding our past (as human), our future (in glory), and our present (in the Spirit) is critical for duly appreciating, chastening, and leveraging our bodies for Jesus in this life. Let's rehearse the story in six acts.

### *1. God Made Our Bodies*

*First, God designed them.* The human body is fearfully and wonderfully made—both in general and in the particular body he made for you.

You formed<sup>1</sup> my inward parts;  
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.  
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
(Ps. 139:13–14)

This is not just a pro-life text. It is that and more. It includes God's stunning design, making, and shaping of our human bodies inside and outside the womb. Brother or sister in Christ, you are “fearfully and wonderfully made.” *Made.*

1 For some readers, the word “formed” may bring to mind Gen. 2:7 and 2:22 (though different Hebrew words are used), which explain how God formed Adam first and then Eve, something to which Paul calls attention in 1 Tim. 2:12–13. God formed them both human but did not make them the same—he designed and built two kinds of humans, male and female. Even in an age losing its bearings about men and women, many in the fitness community today know this well and can appreciate that men and women are fearfully and wonderfully both human and different. I will not have space to address the complementary differences between men and women (which are not irrelevant to exercise), but for a brief study on the complementarity of men and women made in God's image, see John Piper, *What's the Difference: Manhood and Womanhood Defined According to the Bible* (Crossway, 2008).



Built. Designed. Your human body, your human brain, your human eyes, all bear the unmistakable marks of the universe's master builder, master craftsman, and master designer, who is God himself. You are not the product of impersonal forces, such as time, chance, and natural selection. You are designed. Spectacularly built. Fearfully and wonderfully made—both in the past as you were in the womb and at present as you read this book.

The apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20 that God's "invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world." Psalm 19:1 says that "the heavens declare the glory of God." And not only is the glory of our Creator revealed in the creation around us—the skies, the seas, the mountains, the plains, and all the animal kingdom—but we ourselves, we creatures, also proclaim his glory. Right under our noses—in fact, our very eyes, ears, and noses—are even far more striking evidences of the brilliance and skill and wisdom of our designer and maker who is God himself.

*Second, our bodies belong to God.* Contrary to the voices we hear at every turn today, *your body is not your own*. "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:19–20). *Your body*

*is not your own.* It belongs to God. He made it and owns it. This is doubly true for Christians because God both created us and then redeemed us at the infinite cost of his own Son.

*Third, our bodies are for God.* Our bodies are for use in the service and honor of their Creator, which means, ultimately, that our bodies are for God's glory. This can sound strange to modern ears. Perhaps especially in the fitness community. "My body is for the purpose of my glory" is likely not said aloud. But how often, even among Christians, is this the operative principle?

But when we open Scripture and hear what God says, when we seek to make our bodily activity and training holy by his word, by what he says about our bodies, we see that our bodies—indeed all our lives—are for his glory. We exist to glorify God. God made us to enjoy him and make him look good. That's the last part of 1 Corinthians 6:19–20: "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."

Not: Escape your body to glorify him. But: Glorify God *in your body*. Your body is meant for glorifying God, not self. For making God look good, not self look good. You exist for God's glory, and you have a body—however able or disabled—for his glory. So Paul says, "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). And in

Colossians 3:17, he makes our calling explicitly Christian, specifically about Jesus, saying, “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

As a Christian, you have a body for Jesus’s sake. As a Christian, his name is on you. In coming to Christ and receiving baptism, we have taken his name on ourselves. We are called *Christians*. His name has been put on us publicly, and what we do with our minds, hearts, mouths, *and bodies*—either directly or indirectly—makes Jesus look good or is in vain.

God made our bodies. He designed and owns them; they are for him. And he is for them: “The body is . . . for the Lord, and the Lord for the body” (1 Cor. 6:13). But what he has to say about our bodies does not end there.

## *2. Sin Has Seized Our Bodies*

Next comes the tragic and grievous truth that we—and our bodies with us—are fallen.

Sin wracks our bodies not only in the effects of the curse into which we’re born but also in our own desiring and doing of evil. The bodies God gave us to image him as we move about his created world have become bodies of sin and death (Rom. 6:6; 7:24; 8:10). No longer the original unfallen creations (nor yet the coming imperishable bodies), they are

now mortal bodies (Rom. 6:12; 8:11), dishonored in our sin (Rom. 1:24). We will be judged for what we do in the body (2 Cor. 5:10). And apart from God's redemptive provision, we will be thrown—soul *and body*—into hell (Matt. 5:29, 30; 10:28).

Our forefather Adam sinned against God's command—his one *no* in a world of *yes*. And God, in response to human rebellion, and as an ongoing reminder of it, cursed the creation, including our bodies.

The creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him [God] who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (Rom. 8:20–23)

Not only does our fallen world groan, but so do *we ourselves!* Because of human sin, this world and our bodies strain under the power and effects of sin. They are not what they once were.

They break down. They become diseased and get injured—sometimes oh so easily.

However, even though marred by sin, they still remain a marvel. It is all too easy for those of us who are still relatively physically fit and enjoy some measure of good health to fail to marvel that we can stand and move, keep our balance, lift heavy objects, walk for half an hour, or even run several miles.

In this fallen and cursed creation, many great saints are terminally kept from the pleasures of God in exercise. Disabilities abound in the present age. And God has his particular manifestations of mercy for the disabled and their caregivers. Disability can be a great tragedy and great burden to bear. Those of us who are able to move and exercise our bodies would do well to be more regularly and consciously thankful to God. An able body in this sin-sick world is a precious gift not to be taken for granted.

### **A Word on Disability**

For those in Christ living with disabilities, God's grace is sufficient for our thorns (2 Cor. 12:9), and he has his alternate ways of communicating natural and spiritual pleasures to inhibited saints. One dear brother I know more than makes up for every mile he doesn't run with a monstrous

belly laugh, the kind of laugh known only to those who have suffered greatly and found God stronger than every pain. Whether your body is young and vigorous—or old, injured, or disabled—1 Corinthians 6:20 speaks to you too: “Glorify God in your body.”

However old, sick, or diseased your body may be, God has given it to you as your particular vessel to glorify him—the God who turns the world upside down in the seeming weakness and folly of the cross (1 Cor. 1:18–29). My aim in this book is to think Christianly, not naturally or carnally, about bodily health and physical ability. As we will see, there is a real, discernable boost for the spirit in physical exercise. I think that those who are able are wise to leverage it.

But for those unable to exercise, hope is not lost. It’s just a boost. God made our human souls to be “boosted” by bodily activity and exertion but not dependent on it. Disability is not devastating to genuine joy. You can be profoundly happy in Jesus without this boost. Many of the world’s happiest Christians are precisely that. God has his ways for making up for this physical loss in saints who are unable to exert and exercise their bodies.

### 3. *God Himself Took a Human Body*

In our fallen world, God's redemptive provision, stunning in so many ways, begins with the incarnation when God himself took a fully human body in the person of his eternal Son. And he not only took on our human flesh and blood but also gave up his body to death on a cross to cover our sin and rescue us (Phil. 2:8).

If you come to the Christian Scriptures with questions about your own physical body, one of the first surprises may be how much the New Testament talks about the physical body of Jesus (Rom. 7:4; 1 Cor. 10:16; 11:24, 27, 29). His human body is the turning point in the story of our bodies. Jesus "bore our sins *in his body* on the tree" (1 Pet. 2:24). Hebrews memorably puts Psalm 40 on the lips of Jesus when he came into the world as man: "A body have you prepared for me. . . . Behold, I have come to do your will, O God" (Heb. 10:5, 7, quoting Ps. 40:6–8). The author of Hebrews then comments, "By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Heb. 10:10).

Because sin, its curse, and death have infected us in both soul and body, the divine Son took on both a human soul and body; and he gave his body up in sacrificial death to rescue us, soul and body, who are joined to him by faith.

#### 4. *God Himself Dwells in Our Bodies*

Perhaps the part of the body's story most often overlooked is that God himself not only became human in Christ but also now dwells in his people by his Holy Spirit. When 1 Corinthians 6:19 says, "Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God," the emphasis is not on how impressive our bodies are *as temples*. Rather, the focus is the spectacular reality that God himself in his *Holy Spirit* has taken up residence, as it were, "within you"—you *have* the Spirit. Your body is a temple *because you have him*. This is almost too good to be true. It is news to receive with the kind of pulsating joy that comes "with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12)—God himself is in you and at work in you.

Paul makes it plain. If you are in Christ,

the Spirit of God *dwells in you*. . . . [And] if *Christ is in you*, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead *dwells in you*, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who *dwells in you*. (Rom. 8:9–11)



In case you missed it, if you are in Christ, “Christ is in you”—his Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, “dwells in you” (as Paul repeats). You not only have indwelling sin (no. 2 above) but now also have *the indwelling Spirit*. Our human bodies have become dwelling places for God, whom we *have* in the person of his Spirit.

### *5. We Glorify God Now in Our Bodies*

Now, because of Christ’s bodily work outside of us and because of his Spirit’s work inside of us, we live to the glory of God. So Paul says to us in Christ, “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God *in your body*” (1 Cor. 6:19–20).

Already our bodies of humiliation have become instruments for God’s glory. And they *are being redeemed* both as we (positively) magnify God in our affections and actions of love for him and neighbor, and as we (negatively) “by the Spirit . . . put to death the deeds of the body” (Rom. 8:13).

So we pray, like Paul, that “Christ will be honored *in my body*, whether by life or by death” (Phil. 1:20). Given the depth and pervasive effects of sin in our bodies, we might think we need to get out of these bodies in order to glorify God; but because of Christ’s body and the dwelling of his Spirit in our bodies, we can now honor Christ and glorify

God *in our bodies*. So, in Christ, we realize how our bodies truly are “for the Lord” (1 Cor. 6:13).

The Christian life is an embodied life. God doesn’t free us from our bodies at conversion, as if they were prisons. He leaves us in them—glorious and broken as they are. The Christian life, growth, ministry, and love happen in the body. This is our tent for life in Christ in this age. And in particular, three important truths clarify the bodily existence of the Christian life.

*First, God is for the body.* God is not opposed to our bodily existence; neither is he uninterested. He is *for the body*. As we’ve already seen, “The body is . . . for the Lord, and *the Lord for the body*” (1 Cor. 6:13).

*Second, God commends bodily exertion.* God plainly commends the use of our bodies through the effort of work (Eph. 4:28; 2 Thess. 3:10), even hard work (2 Tim. 2:6)—that we not be idle but “busy at work” (2 Thess. 3:11). Laziness is sin and both a physical and spiritual danger (Prov. 21:25). In particular, 1 Timothy 4:8 (the verse you may have been waiting on) affirms the value of bodily training. And that affirmation comes on top of the assumption in ancient times of a far greater degree of physical activity in the course of normal life and occupation, not to mention travel. And even in that more active context in the ancient

world, the apostle does not condemn but commends physical training.

*Third, spiritual health is ultimate; physical health is not.* In other words, an asymmetrical relationship exists between our eternal souls and temporal bodies. This is an important clarification, often overlooked in efforts to rescue the physical life from neglect and spiritualism. For the Christian, the charge to bodily exertion is qualified. In appropriating what God has said about our bodies and their training, it is essential that we observe the balancing word of 1 Timothy 4:8: “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 recognition that “bodily training is of some value” cuts both ways. Those today who are sedentary by choice need to hear that God does indeed value the exertion of our bodies (and designed them to work best and happiest when moving), and those who are prone to make exercise an idol need to hear that it is only of *some* value, relativized by the pursuit of godliness, which “is of value in every way.”<sup>2</sup>

- 2 I understand “godliness” to be spiritual maturity or holiness (2 Pet. 1:5–7; 3:11). Christians are to pursue godliness and train themselves for it (1 Tim. 4:7; 6:11) through Christian teaching and by faith (1 Tim. 6:3; Titus 1:1). Such godliness is perfectly embodied in Jesus, the God-man (1 Tim. 3:16). I treat “godliness” as synonymous with “Christlikeness,” in both the inner and outer person.

The health of the soul being ultimate doesn't mean that the health of the body is insignificant or marginal. This is where some Christians have gone wrong. Rather, bodily movement and exertion are important, and as Christians we put the body to work in service of our souls and the souls of others.

So even now, in this life, we seek to glorify God in our bodies. Whereas we once presented our bodies to sin, we now present them to God as *living* sacrifices (Rom. 12:1). We do not sacrifice our bodies for Christ in the way he sacrificed his body for us—that is, redemptively. He *died* (and rose again) to rescue us. We *live* for him (which could lead to our dying) as those rescued by him. His sacrificial death is the cause; our sacrificial living is the effect. And to that end, we discipline our bodies (1 Cor. 9:27), refuse to let sin reign in our mortal bodies (Rom. 6:12), and so pray and repent and act that our bodies “be kept blameless” till the day of Christ (1 Thess. 5:23).

The healthy Christian life is no passive existence. The words of Jesus and his apostles call us to action again and again. As J. C. Ryle observes,

It would not be difficult to point out at least twenty-five or thirty distinct passages in the epistles where believers are plainly taught to use active personal exertion, and are addressed as responsible for doing energetically what

Christ would have them do, and are not told to “yield themselves” up as passive agents and sit still, but to arise and work. A holy violence, a conflict, a warfare, a fight, a soldier’s life, a wrestling, are spoken of as characteristic of the true Christian.<sup>3</sup>

### 6. *We Await a Spectacular Bodily Upgrade*

Our future will be forever embodied—beyond our best imagining. At that coming day of Christ, he “will transform our lowly body [literally, “the body of our humiliation”] to be like his glorious body” (Phil. 3:21).

Here we live, like Jesus did, in a state of humiliation. Even as we experience some of the original glories of our human bodies, they are short-lived. Soon enough, we age, we suffer tragedies and losses, and we realize increasingly what a state of humiliation this life is in these bodies. And if Christ does not return first, we soon will endure the great humiliation of death.

But for those in Christ, the dishonor of death will give way to the glory of resurrection. Our natural bodies will be sown in death like seeds that will spring up and blossom, through Christ’s resurrection power, into bodies of glory

<sup>3</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties and Roots* (1879; repr., Counted Faithful, 2015), location 217, Kindle.

like his own risen body. “What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15:42–44).

Note well, this will be a spiritual *body*—not merely a *spirit*, like a ghost—but a *spiritual body* fit for the fullness of the Holy Spirit in the rock-solid world of the new heavens and new earth. Contrary to the bad pop theology of some, Christians have believed for two thousand years that *our future will be embodied*.

Not only is God *for the body* in this age but also in the age to come. Above we saw 1 Corinthians 6:13: “The body is . . . for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.” The next verse reads, “God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power” (1 Cor. 6:14). The creative brilliance and glory of God’s design in the human body will not be discarded at Christ’s second coming. Finally we will be fully set free. Our bodies will shine out with the fullness of God’s purpose. Our future is embodied. Faithful Christian theology does not diminish the importance of our bodies but heightens it—from God’s creative design, to his ongoing affirmation, to his promise to raise them, to his calling to use them even now.

One day soon Jesus will transform our lowly, earthly, natural bodies to be like his glorious, heavenly, supernatural body—that is, the body he still has. He rose again bodily. He ascended bodily. He now sits at the right hand of God in heaven in his fully human, glorified body. When he comes back bodily, brings heaven with him to earth, and establishes the physical, embodied new world, we will enjoy (with him) what it means to have a fully human, glorified body.

### **Praise the Man of Heaven**

If you are in Christ, your resurrection body will be spectacular. No more aches and pains. No more colds and COVID. No more sprains, contusions, and broken bones. No more heart attacks, strokes, and cancer. No more disease. No more devastating physical and mental disabilities.

Soon enough, you will shine like the sun in your perfected, strong, beautiful, imperishable, glorified human body. And the best part of all isn't what *your body* will be like but *whom* our imperishable bodies and souls will help us to know, enjoy, be near, and praise—the man of heaven. “Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust [Adam], we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven [Jesus Christ]” (1 Cor. 15:49).

The focus in the new heavens and new earth won't be on our bodies. Our perfected bodies will no longer experience

the many distractions and drawbacks of our previous humiliations. They will enhance and support our making much of our King. Our focus in glory will be the one whom we eagerly await right now—the man of heaven.



