

Are You a Gym-Only Person?

I read the following proverb in The Message translation of my Bible this morning, and it struck me—as certain Scriptures will to believers within the fitness industry—as possessing an intriguing application, not just to our spiritual selves, but to our physical bodies as well. Take a look:

“Clean living before God and justice with our neighbors mean far more to GOD than religious performance” (Prov. 21:3, MSG).

My eyes almost immediately, and involuntarily, turned the words “clean living” into “clean eating,” which naturally led me down a mental rabbit trail on which I began to think about how many of us exhibit ritualistic, “religious” behavior with regards to our fitness, just as countless Christians do concerning their faith.

I have no intentions of sermonizing here, but it’s no secret that countless pews are populated by “Sunday Morning Christians,” that is, people who attend church for approximately one hour each week, then live Monday through Saturday without cracking open their Bibles or putting into practice what they read about, sung about and heard about during church.

Sunday Morning Christians clap to the beat during praise and worship, say “Amen” or nod piously in all the right places, bow their heads in reverence when the communion trays are passed around, even drop money into the offering plate. But this is all merely, as Solomon wrote, “religious performance.” While their bodies are present in the house of God, their spirits couldn’t be farther away.

This, what I shall call “Sundays-Only Syndrome,” is no less than tragic because those who are symptomatic are very often downcast, weary, and frankly, *weak* individuals. (And for the record, I’m sure you would agree that all Christ followers

have been Sunday Morning Christians at one time or another—we all fall short!)

Instead of living a life of abundance that Jesus came to give, they feel they are always lacking. Instead of clinging tightly to God's promises when storm clouds roll in, they latch onto fear and search for answers in all the wrong places. Instead of retreating into silence and praying to Almighty God when an offense takes place or worry fills their minds, they fret and vent, murmur and complain, only exacerbating their troubles.

I'm sure you've heard it said that Christianity isn't about religion; it's about relationship. Along those lines, the late pastor and author Adrian Rogers once said, "Christianity is a *love relationship* between a child of God and his Maker through the Son Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit." Without an intimate relationship with Jesus that is empowered by the Holy Spirit, our Christian walk will be rendered joyless, anemic and woefully unprotected from the blows of life and the darts of the evil one.

Now, shifting gears from the spiritual to the physical, I've observed a similar complacency in the fitness world, one I will refer to as "Gym-Only Syndrome." Those with this "condition," so to speak, present with this straightforward set of symptoms:

- A habit of working out regularly, maybe even five or six days a week (for some, however, the habit is off and on)
- The discipline to listen to their trainer (if they have one) and diligently follow a training program or attend a specific class
- Frustration and stagnation in their progress that stems from their not-so-healthy activities *outside* of the gym, namely poor eating (or, in many cases, an excessive consumption of healthy foods) and a sedentary lifestyle

Like Sunday Morning Christians, Gym-Only People (the *other* .!)

have their game faces on throughout their hour or so of training, but their habits outside the gym reflect those of someone who doesn't prioritize their health.

Here are just a few examples of what Gym-Only People may do:

- Snack on junk food in between meals (it could be that junk food *is* their meals)
- Don't control their portions and eat double or triple what they should
- Sit at their desk for hours on end without taking breaks to walk around, stretch or get some sunshine
- Don't drink enough water
- Don't eat nutrient-dense foods
- Restrict their calories too much, thereby slowing down their metabolism, which can cause fatigue, irritability, listlessness and mental foginess

The results of such a Gym-Only lifestyle also correspond with those experienced by Sunday Morning Christians. Instead of growing stronger, they feel weaker. Goals are seldom met. Working out feels robotic and dull. Silver bullets to solve their problems are sought after and tried, but they never work.

Like any other close relationship, be it with Christ, our children or our spouse, our relationship with fitness requires effort and devotion that transcends simply putting in the time. When we love someone, we think about them often, talk to them every day (or nearly every day), think of ways to bring them joy and bless them in some small way, even if it means inconveniencing ourselves. Conversely, when we only go through the motions of love, actions that carry no meaning, we distance ourselves from the object of our affection and begin to stray from it.

If you find yourself deviating from a healthy lifestyle during the 23 hours you're away from the gym, then it's likely

fitness has become more about “religious performance” than “clean living before God” (Prov. 21:3, MSG). You go to the gym (or studio, or pool, etc.) because you know it’s the right thing to do, but that fact hasn’t made its way from your head down to your heart. You haven’t yet formed a *relationship* with it. And so, you don’t tend to your body, your temple, the way you should when you’re at home, at work, or wherever the day takes you.

As it turns out, the antidote for Gym-Only Syndrome mirrors the remedy that heals ho-hum, ineffectual Sunday Morning Christians and transforms them into exuberant, unstoppable, victorious all-week ones. There isn’t a 10-step process, a book, a program, or a product that can help you “live clean” around the clock. There is only a sincere, soul-deep desire to become fitter, whether inside or outside, followed by specific actions that, at first, may seem obligatory and unexciting, but after a while, will begin to feel like an integral, indispensable part of your day.

Spiritual examples of such actions could include praying a few minutes each morning, watching a sermon on YouTube during lunch, or reading the Psalms before bed. A few physical examples are eliminating processed junk foods from your diet, introducing more fresh fruits and vegetables, or parking farther from your workplace, local grocery store, etc., to ensure you’re more active throughout the day.

As C.S. Lewis so eloquently put it, “What saves a man is to take a step. Then another step.” Turn the opposite direction of where you’re facing right now and simply take a step of faith. A step toward relationship, toward intentionality, toward commitment ... toward “clean living” in body and soul.

Walk confidently, knowing that the Holy Spirit, whose name in Greek means “an advocate, comforter, helper,” is there to guide and uplift you along the way. Let Him renew your mind and fix your focus on your heavenly Father. Let a desire to

please your Maker and glorify your Savior direct you, and watch as everything else falls into place.

“Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need” (Matt. 6:33, NLT).

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