

Maintenance: How Faith and Fitness Compare and Contrast

I was recently intrigued by an Instagram picture posted by one of the many inspiring fit females I follow, one who's also a very busy mom, to boot.

Though the post showcased her impressive physique, it wasn't the rock-hard abs or defined quads that got my attention, but the caption. In it, she gave her stats: her height and weight, how she eats, what supplements she takes, whether she has "cheat meals" and so on. She ended the post by sharing her current fitness goal: **"Maintain."**

Since I was introduced to weightlifting and healthy eating when I was 16, I've drawn many parallels between our physical and spiritual journeys. For example, when my trainer explained to me that in order for muscles to grow, they must first be broken down through *resistance* training, a lightbulb flashed in my head. (You already see where I'm going with this, don't you?)

It's like that with our faith; in order to grow stronger spiritually, we must undergo—and *persevere through*—periods of **resistance**. We can't take shortcuts and expect stronger muscles or more solid faith. We must consider each "training session," if you will, "*an opportunity for great joy*," because it is through these tough times of pain, diligence, and testing that we're made "*perfect and complete, needing nothing*."

Another example of a faith/fitness analogy is that of stretching. (Again, it doesn't take much imagination to see where my train of thought is headed.) If you've ever taken a Yoga class or simply stretched for five minutes for the first time in decades, then you know stretching can often feel more

strenuous than an hour-long weights or cardio routine. Why? Because too many of us have sedentary jobs or we neglect to tack on stretching to the end of our workouts, so naturally our muscles are very, very tight.

Our aversion to stretching is understandable. After all, holding unnatural poses for any length of time is unpleasant and time consuming! *But* ... it's incredibly beneficial. Stretching minimizes the risk of injury, relaxes fatigued muscles, increases flexibility and range of motion during lifts, just to name a few.

Needless to say, it's also important that we allow ourselves to be "stretched" in the spiritual sense. If we resist the Holy Spirit nudging us out of our comfort zones, not only do we become stiff, dried-out pieces of clay, we miss out on many of the blessings the Potter had in store for us had we let Him bend, stretch and shape us as He saw fit.

OK, two is a sufficient number of examples, I think! Now let's get back to the Instagram post and its final word, "Maintain."

First of all, it made me chuckle as I was reminded of this meme of comedian Jim Gaffigan:



Second, and more seriously, it made me realize that there is at least one way in which faith and fitness are drastically different from one another.

This hardcore fitness woman I follow didn't start off as the picture of health. In fact, her "Before" photos show you're average out-of-shape individual who doesn't place a lot of value on her physical health. Fast-forward a few years—after hours of stretching and resistance training (not to mention eating right!)—I might add, and she no longer has weight loss goals, muscle-building goals, stamina-increasing goals, what have you.

In fact, her only goal is to *maintain* the physique she has now. She's at the top of the mountain she set out to climb, and now she wants to enjoy the view as long as possible without traversing another valley or weathering another storm. Oh, she'll still have to fend off the predators that might sneak up and try to destroy her serenity, as well as remove any obstacles that could obstruct her view, but all in all, the toughest part of her journey is behind her.

When it comes to physical fitness, there is nothing wrong whatsoever with such maintenance goals. After all, there are only so many muscles one can build (without the use of steroids!) and so much strength one can accumulate (see previous parenthetical). But not so with our spiritual fitness.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul compares our faith to a **race**, the finish line of which will not be crossed until we enter heaven's gates. Read what he wrote to the Philippian church:

"Not that I have already attained or have already been perfected, but I follow after it so that I may lay hold of that for which I was seized by Christ Jesus. Brothers, I do not count myself to have attained, but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal to the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:12-14).

So we see there is no peak this side of paradise on which we can pitch a tent and camp out, never to scale another mountain again. We are ever running, ever striving, ever enduring because to stop—to *maintain*—is to backpedal toward the starting line.

"Do you not know that all those who run in a race run, but one receives the prize? So run, that you may obtain it" (1 Cor.

9:24).

As 2016 approaches it, I encourage you not only to think about setting goals pertaining to your physical health and outward appearance, but to ponder how the Lord may be leading you to grow in the areas of your spiritual well-being ... and the unseen matters of your *heart*.

As the prophet Isaiah poetically put it, *"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God shall stand forever."* (Is. 40:8). I might add that "muscles shrink and good looks fade, but our spirit lasts eternally."

May we be filled with a thirst for righteousness and a hunger for God's Word every single day of our lives, never thinking we've arrived to a transcendent summit where faith's journey is done. May the footsteps of saints and apostles and believing friends and family who have gone before us spur us onward and upward toward heavenly Mount Zion where we will hear the incomparable words, *"Well done, good and faithful servant."*

"Therefore, since we are encompassed with such a great cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us. Let us look to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12: 1-2).

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