

Staying Fit For the Right Reasons

The thought of attending your high school reunion may be enough to get you to lose those extra pounds, but you'll need a better reason to keep them off.

God created us to be purpose driven. In other words, our natural inclination is to operate with an intent—a motive, so to speak.

The Bible gives us a number of examples of men and women who did extraordinary things (whether for good or evil) in order to fulfill a purpose or reach a goal. Jacob, for instance, worked 14 years for the deceitful Laban in order to marry the woman of his dreams (see Gen. 29). He had a motive (espousing the lovely Rachel), which served to motivate him to work an extra seven years to accomplish his objective.

It is human nature to operate with a purpose and not wander about aimlessly. The majority of things we set out to accomplish are done with a motive. This is how the Lord created us, and this attribute of mankind extends to every aspect of our living and influences our spiritual as well as our physical lives.

It applies even to weight loss. Most people who set out to lose weight have a specific motive for doing so. Maybe the class reunion is fast approaching and you're determined to be only 10 pounds heavier than when you graduated, not 50. Or you may have booked a Caribbean cruise and simply refuse to slip on a bathing suit without first firming up and slimming down.

Is there a wedding coming up? How about a family portrait? Whatever the case may be, all too often our motivation for losing weight is simply the desire to change our outward appearance.

But remember Proverbs 31:30 tells us “charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting” (NIV). So if your objective for losing weight is only to enhance your looks, please take my advice: reconsider your motive.

VANITY IS NOT A VIRTUE Don’t misunderstand me—there is nothing wrong with wanting to look good. After all, Queen Esther received a year’s worth of beauty treatments before going into the royal chambers to visit the king (see Esth. 2:12).

Our appearance is important, and first impressions (even second impressions) carry a tremendous impact. But there are a few reasons why appearance should not be the sole motivator for weight loss.

For starters, losing weight for cosmetic reasons is an entirely goal-oriented approach. We are determined to reach an arbitrary number on the scale or a certain size dress or suit.

Once the goal is reached (or once the vacation or the class reunion is over) we find ourselves without a motive, and we soon become unmotivated to continue doing those things we did to reach our goal in the first place—namely, eating right and exercising regularly. We have to shift our focus from the temporary to the permanent.

It’s not about achieving the temporary goal of squeezing into a dress that was two sizes too small to begin with. It’s about permanently establishing a brand-new way of living.

Ironically, another reason why appearance alone should not be the primary motivator is that many people are quite satisfied with their appearance. And because they are content with being “pleasingly plump,” they have no real desire to lose weight—even when shedding a few pounds would improve their health.

I find this is especially common in African American and Hispanic women, who are not as inclined to strive for

society's standard of an acceptable body weight as are Caucasian and Asian women.

But though this high level of self-satisfaction might guard against conditions such as anorexia nervosa, it can be a real problem when contentment leads to complacency.

In my years of medical practice I've encountered a number of patients with serious medical problems related to improper diet, inadequate exercise and excessive body weight. But despite being diagnosed with potentially life-threatening illnesses such as type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease, and despite the crippling pain of conditions such as osteoarthritis, they felt satisfied with their appearance (vanity).

They didn't want to lose weight, even when their health was at stake. I've had patients tell me they were afraid they would look "sick" if they lost 10 or 20 pounds, not realizing those extra pounds might just escort them into an early grave.

If you want to lose weight, don't allow yourself to be driven by vanity. Vanity is not a virtue; it is the cousin of pride, and "pride goes before destruction" (Prov. 16:18).

THE PROPER MOTIVE Adopting a healthier lifestyle requires discipline, moderation and self-control—character traits supported throughout the Scriptures. In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, for example, Paul says: "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.

"Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.

"Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself

will not be disqualified for the prize.”

Paul compares the Christian life to an athletic competition here and in other parts of the Bible (see 2 Tim. 4:7; Gal. 2:2). What a powerful word picture to emphasize the benefits of living a life of discipline, moderation and self-control.

These character traits are perfected through the Holy Spirit and are vital to us if we are to mature on this Christian journey. And even though the prize Paul speaks of is our heavenly reward, we can't ignore the importance of exercising these same qualities in our physical lives.

It's actually difficult (if not impossible) to separate these two aspects of our existence since spiritual maturation requires that we keep fleshly desires under subjection (including the desire to overeat), and that we become adept at resisting temptation (including the temptation to indulge ourselves with our favorite foods).

A professional athlete practices discipline, moderation and self-control whether she feels like it or not. Her body does not call the shots—she does.

In other words, she engages in rigorous training on a regular basis, no matter what the circumstances, and no matter what her “flesh” would rather be doing. The same is required of any woman attempting to modify her lifestyle to improve her health.

Our flesh ought not to control us. But without discipline, moderation and self-control, you'll soon discover how easy it is for the flesh to overtake you and for your worthy plans of living a healthier life to fall by the wayside.

It requires self-discipline to crawl out of a warm and cozy bed for a brisk 30-minute walk. It requires moderation to stop at one scoop of ice cream or one tablespoon of gravy. And it requires self-control to keep on driving past your favorite

fast-food restaurant.

HONOR GOD WITH YOUR BODY When you start with discipline, moderation and self-control, and then add the proper motive, you will certainly see results. If you refuse to be motivated by vanity but let your main desire be to improve your health (or maintain the good health you already have), then you're on the right track.

Think about it this way: As believers, our bodies are the living temples of the Holy Spirit (see 1 Cor. 6:19-20). So taking care of our bodies is one way we honor God. Losing weight as an effort to maintain the temple of God is an honorable endeavor; any other reason borders on self-centeredness and vanity.

Let's compare it to the act of giving. We can give our tithes and offerings with a selfish, goal-oriented mind-set, focusing on the "good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over" return promised to us in Luke 6:38. But this is giving with the wrong motive.

The Bible says to "honor the Lord with your wealth" (Prov. 3:9). So giving is an act of worship, a way of honoring God.

It shouldn't be a selfish act prompted by the promise of how much we will get in return. The same holds true for any of the other ways we honor God.

Remember in the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus described people who fasted and prayed just to call attention to themselves? He said their reward would be from men and not from God. The problem was that their motive wasn't to have fellowship with God through prayer and fasting but to receive recognition and attention from other men.

Everything—yes, everything—we do as believers ought to honor God, including our motive for wanting to lose weight. The incentive to adhere to a healthy lifestyle should be to honor

God through caring for our bodies, His temple, and not any self-centered desire to improve our looks.

If we end up looking a little nicer in the process, then that's great, but it shouldn't be our primary motivation.

KEEP FOCUSED ON THE GOAL I'm convinced that one of the reasons so many people are unsuccessful with long-term weight loss is they are operating with the wrong motive. Keep the proper focus. Purpose in your heart that you will honor God by taking care of your body, the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, and start making a change today.

A dear patient once assured me that she was going to dramatically change her lifestyle by eating right, exercising and losing weight right after the Memorial Day holiday. She was planning a large party that weekend, a culinary feast for more than 100 guests.

The only problem was that she gave me this promise not in late May but in the first part of April! She failed to understand that the best time to start changing bad habits is the present.

Caring for our bodies is not a thing we decide to do on some future date or for a limited period of time. Honoring the Lord should be our present and continual lifestyle, whether we're honoring Him in our worship, our giving, our service or even through taking care of our physical bodies.

Make a commitment today that you will rely on the Holy Spirit to strengthen your resolve. Then go ahead and break those old, bad habits and replace them with new, healthier practices that you'll follow for the rest of your life.

Don't even entertain the thought of how much better you'll look with a slimmer physique. Remember this—when the presence and the glory of God shines through you, you already look good no matter what the number on the scale. Once you get your

motives in order, be prepared to reap the benefits of better health.

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