

10 Spiritual Lessons I Learned at the Gym

Six months ago I started a serious fitness plan. I had gained weight, and I was watching guys my age pack on pounds. Because I have some big dreams that will take several more years to achieve, I need to stay healthy and able to travel. So I talked to some friends about their workout routines, joined a gym and changed my eating habits.

The hard work is paying off. I've not only lost weight and gained muscle but I've learned some valuable spiritual lessons in the process. God speaks to me even while I do planks, sit-ups and bench presses! Here are 10 lessons I've learned that will help you get fit both physically and spiritually:

1. Your DIET makes all the difference. If you don't eat right, no exercise routine will benefit you. Some people talk themselves into believing if they run on a treadmill for 30 minutes they can binge on ice cream, Big Macs or bags of Doritos. Good luck with that! If you want to lose weight and add muscle you must cut the empty carbs and eat more protein and power foods.

The apostle Paul scolded the Corinthians because they wanted spiritual "milk" instead of "solid food" (1 Cor. 3:1-2). You will not grow spiritually until you wean yourself off of spiritual fluff and start eating the meat of the Word. Bible study is hard work, but when you dig deep you will grasp revelation from the Holy Spirit.

2. Develop a PLAN for growth—and follow it. If you approach exercise haphazardly, the results will be minimal. The same is true about discipleship. Some Christians are tossed around by every wind of doctrine or every wave of trendy teaching because they have no goal. But the apostle Paul was focused.

He said: "I press toward the goal to the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14). Your goal should be to know Jesus and to make Him known to others. Don't get distracted.

3. To grow muscle you must RESIST. When I lift a 30-pound dumbbell or do push-ups, I am using weights or my own body weight to create resistance. The tension caused by the resistance, called hypertrophy, causes muscle fibers to expand. The "burn" you feel after exercise is evidence that your muscle is growing. The same is true in the spirit. If you resist temptation, you will grow spiritually even though it may hurt. But if you give into temptation, you will stay spiritually flabby and weak.

4. CORE exercises are vital! The best fitness instructors will tell you'll never be truly fit if you don't pay attention to your abdominal muscles. You may hate planks or crunches, but a healthy core is the foundation of a good physique. The same is true for you spiritually. The core of a Christian is his or her prayer life. Neglect prayer and you will lose your power. The secret of the apostle Paul's spiritual life was 1 Thessalonians 5:17: "Pray without ceasing."

5. You will never make progress if you aren't CONSISTENT. Because I travel a lot, I cannot always go to a gym. So I found a fitness routine that I can use no matter where I am. All I need is a floor, a chair and some rubber exercise cords and I can work out for an hour using body weight alone. But having this plan is useless if I don't do it four times a week. The more consistent I am, the more results I will see. Don't be a quitter. He who endures to the end will be saved!

6. VARY your exercise routine. Our body is like a computer, and it can get used to a routine if we do the same exercises week after week. Trainers recommend that you "surprise" your body by mixing up exercises. You should do the same in your spiritual training. Don't get in a religious rut. Sing a "new

song” to the Lord. Be open to the new things He wants to teach you.

7. You’ll make more progress if you have a COACH. When I decided to start my routine, I asked a friend from South Africa named Jabin to devise a plan for me. Jabin is an athlete who knows a lot more about fitness than I do. He not only made a plan but he showed me how to do each exercise.

A lot of Christians are trying to become disciples on their own, without a mentor. Jesus showed us the model of discipleship; He invested in His followers and then commissioned them to train others. You will grow spiritually if you have someone to help you.

8. TWO are better than one. I don’t always get to exercise with a gym partner, but when I do I find that I have a better workout with better results. I push harder when someone is there to encourage me. The same is true in your walk with God. So many of us try to live the Christian life alone, yet Jesus sent out His disciples two by two. Every David needs a Jonathan to reach his full potential. Having a friend to “spot” you is a sure way to grow as a disciple.

9. Fitness requires REST. One of the first things my friend Jabin taught me about weightlifting was the importance of resting in between reps. Muscles will not grow if you push them incessantly without breaks. Rest is a spiritual principle that was programmed into our world when God rested on the seventh day. Some people think they can get ahead by working 24/7, but work without rest only leads to burnout. In your spiritual life, take the needed time to relax, unwind, play and reflect on God’s goodness.

10. God can use FAILURE to help you grow. I have another fitness coach, a pastor named Mark, who encouraged me to use the principle of “failure” in my weight lifting. He taught me that on my last set of each exercise, I should keep lifting

until I can't go any more. "Lifting to failure" increases blood flow to the muscle and boosts muscle growth. It will also make you sweat!

The old gym slogan, "No pain, no gain," is also a spiritual truth. Ecclesiastes 9:10 says: "Whatever your hands find to do, do with your strength." Don't be halfhearted in serving the Lord. Throw all your energy into whatever He calls you to do, and you will reap the blessings. {eoa}