

Exercise for the Soul

Our spiritual health is as important to our well-being as our physical health.

There's something about starting a new year that motivates us to focus on getting fit. After the holidays, gyms are full of people huffing and puffing to get their bodies in shape. During the years I've made it a priority to work out, yet I'll admit I'm more likely this time of year to be disciplined about it.

Since the Bible tells us that our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit (see 1 Cor. 6:19), it makes sense to keep them in top form. But as every worshiper knows, the outside of the temple is not the crucial part; it's what's on the inside that counts.

The insides of our temples—our souls and our spirits—need exercising, too. That's why I'm more committed this year than ever before to learning how to “work out” in prayer.

Recently an old book by Glenn Clark has given me insight into ways to pray that have radically improved my spiritual life. In *The Soul's Sincere Desire*, Clark states that physical exercise provides a model for strengthening our inner man. He suggests that we pray as consistently as we exercise—for at least 15 minutes a day.

“Prayer should be for the spirit exactly what calisthenics should be for the body,” he wrote in 1925. “Something to keep one in tune, fit, vital, efficient and constantly ready for the next problem of life.”

Who doesn't want to be "constantly ready for the next problem in life"—and for the next blessing and the next divine assignment as well? I'm sure we all do. So with the enthusiasm of those who want to work off the extra pounds gained by eating too much during the holidays, let's focus this new year on prayer in a way that makes prayer not something we must do to be good Christians but something we engage in to expand our souls to receive the infinite love of God.

How do we accomplish this?

In my own workout routine, I've learned to first stretch my muscles. In prayer, the first step should be to stretch the mind and spirit to take in the reality of God—in all His vastness.

While exercising, we must breathe deeply so that oxygen reaches the muscles. During prayer, we must breathe deeply, too, clearing our brains and hearts of the bad and praying in the good.

We must dismiss from our minds the trouble that seems imminent and restate emphatically the promises of God. In addition, we must forgive those who have sinned against us and repent and accept forgiveness for our own sins.

Physical fitness experts know that if you exercise, the benefits of burning fat and breathing deeply continue after the exercise ends. This is the goal of prayer—to stretch the spirit and make the deep breathing of the soul something that goes on throughout the day. It is the goal Paul referred to when he told us to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17).

The trouble with most of us is that our praying is too negative. We shut ourselves up by breathing in again and again the troubles that we should release to God. When we give them to Him, we can take in the new, fresh air of His Holy Spirit.

Glenn Clark describes the process: “Just as in physical breathing we expel the poisons we wish to eliminate and then drink in slowly of the new, fresh, life-giving, body-building ozone, holding it, first deep in the lungs, then high, turning it over, so to speak, till we have completely absorbed the life-giving oxygen, so we should intentionally expel our wrong thoughts, turning instantly to the constructive, soul-building affirmations.”

Because our spiritual health is as important to our well-being as our physical health, I’m recommending to you Clark’s daily prayer regimen, which I believe will help you get in shape inside and leave you feeling more alive in the new year than ever before. It has certainly helped me to become more aware of God’s kingdom all day long.

Prayer is no longer just something on my daily “to do” list or a recitation of things in which I need God to intervene; it is a continual awareness of His presence. I’m trusting it will become so for you also as we continue in the next few issues to look at prayer as a way of entering God’s kingdom here and now.

SPIRITUAL
EXERCISE FOR THE SOUL

BY GLENN CLARK

To help
pray-ers with this exercise, Clark offers the following
examples of meditations
to stretch the mind:

“Heavenly
Father, we know that Your Love is as infinite as the sky is
infinite, and Your
ways of manifesting that love are as uncountable as the stars
of the heavens.

Your
wisdom is greater than all hidden treasures and yet as
instantly available for
our needs as the very ground beneath our feet.

Your
peace is closer than the atmosphere that wraps us around and
as inescapable as
the very air we breathe.

As You
keep the stars in their courses, so will You guide our steps
in perfect
harmony, without clash or discord of any kind, if we but
keep our trust in You.
For we know You will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is
stayed on You
because he trusts in You. We know that, if we acknowledge
You in all our ways,
You will direct our paths. For You are the God of love,
Giver of every good and
perfect gift, and there is none beside You. You art
omnipotent, omniscient, and
omnipresent; in all, through all, and over all, the only
God. And Yours is the
kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.”

Clark

writes: "Marvelous results will come if one will turn in thought to God and heaven, deny the existence in heaven of the wrong thing felt or thought, and then realize that in God and heaven the opposite condition prevails. One must dismiss from his mind completely the thought that the wrong thing felt or seen is permanent, and then follow instantly with the realization that the opposite condition exists here and now.

Realizing

that the opposite of the negative condition exists comes from praying denials and affirmations from the Scriptures, particularly the psalms. For example, in the 23rd psalm, the denials are "I shall not want" and "I will fear no evil." Each of these denials is followed by a series of affirmations:

He maketh
me to lie down in green pastures:

He leadeth
me beside the still waters.

He
restoreth my soul:

He leadeth
me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

(Yea,
though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death)

For Thou
art with me;

Thy rod and
Thy staff they comfort me.

Thou
preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.

Thou
anointest my head with oil.

My cup
runneth over.

Surely goodness
and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will
dwell in the
house of the Lord for ever.