

Why Physical Fitness Should Be a Spiritual Priority

One year ago I faced a sad reality in the mirror: I was getting fat. I was beginning to resemble the fat preachers I had seen going back for third helpings at the Sunday afternoon all-you-can-eat buffet line.

At first I tried to ignore my weight gain by cropping photos and adjusting my belt. But the numbers on the scale weren't lying. I told myself I didn't have time to exercise or eat right because my ministry kept me too busy. I had more "spiritual" things to do than exercise.

But finally I made a powerful decision to reclaim my life. I got ruthless, sort of like when Jesus went into the temple with His whip. I slashed all white bread, sugar, junk food and sodas from my diet. I joined a gym. And I started an exercise routine that I can do anywhere, even in a hotel room.

After one year, I've lost weight and gained muscle—and I feel better than I have in years, even though I've faced enormous stress this year. My progress has motivated me to get even more fit in 2017. And it has helped me realize that physical fitness is not something optional.

I won't win a popularity contest for saying this, but it's true: The American church is fat—and ministers are sometimes the biggest sinners when it comes to overeating. This may be one key reason we don't address bad eating habits from the pulpit. If a preacher is hiding his huge stomach with his Sunday jacket, he's certainly not going to deliver a sermon about gluttony.

So here's my attempt to confront the issue. Here are three reasons why physical fitness needs to move up your priority list in this New Year:

1. Because you should glorify God with your body. I know Christians who would love to go on a mission trip, participate in a three-day fast or lead a weekly discipleship group for teenagers. But they never do these things because they are limited by their physical abilities. Some of us are simply too overweight, too tired or too out of shape to engage in any type of rigorous ministry.

Yet the New Testament teaches that our spirituality can't be separated from the physical. The apostle Paul wrote: "What? Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God, and that you are not your own?" (1 Cor. 6:19).

Paul's powerful words, in their context, refer to the importance of sexual purity. Sexual sin is wrong because we should never do with our bodies what would offend the indwelling Holy Spirit. So if this is true for immoral types of sex, is it not also true when we fill our bodies with drugs, alcohol or unhealthy food?

In New Testament times, Gnostic heretics taught that a Christian can love God and yet engage in any kind of immoral sin because it is physical, not spiritual. Yet Paul denounced this by saying: "Therefore glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:20b). Today we still preach against sexual sin, yet gluttony is no longer considered a sin in most churches. Instead, we laugh about it while we pass the cheesecake and the onion rings.

2. Because how you control your appetite affects every other area of your life. Part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit is self-control (see Gal. 5:23). Yet in the church today, we have created a culture of overeating—and then we wonder why some Christians fall into porn addiction, adultery or gambling. The truth is that we have sanctioned food addiction as "acceptable flesh"—and we are reaping the consequences.

Jacob's brother, Esau, sold his birthright for a bowl of stew because his appetite controlled his judgment. Many Christians have done the same. We forfeit certain spiritual blessings simply because we can't say no to food.

3. Because you want to live a long and fruitful life. I decided to get serious about fitness last year because I'm getting older, and I want to make the biggest possible mark on my generation before I die. It's a lie that you can't be fit in your 50s or 60s. I want to be like the biblical Caleb, who testified that he was as strong at age 85 as he was at age 40.

God has promised the righteous a long life, but that isn't an automatic guarantee. Long life requires wisdom, which includes healthy eating, regular exercise, proper rest and stress management. When we binge regularly on pizzas, sodas and glazed donuts and fill our bodies with processed foods full of chemicals, we shouldn't be surprised when we end up with diabetes, heart ailments, high blood pressure and an early funeral. Don't eat for the moment. Always keep tomorrow in mind when you are looking at the menu.

Jesus called His followers disciples, a term that means "disciplined ones." Yet how many of us would honestly say we are disciplined in the area of food and fitness? I challenge you to make this your goal in the coming year. Be a disciple. The decision you make today to get healthy will reap countless benefits—not only for you, but also for those you love. {eoa}