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A Christian Vision for Exercise
Ten Lessons from a Ten-Year Project





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For ten years, I lived a very sedentary life.

In 2006, I took my first full-time desk job. It came with a laptop and cellphone. The next year, I was married, patterns of life shifted, and soon I was doing little regular physical activity. It took me years to realize I needed to change.

In the summer of 2015, with encouragement from my wife, I started jogging in the mornings about three times per week. In the months and years that followed, I enjoyed adding other modest physical activities to my life. In the process, I've learned much about God's world, the human body, the pursuit of joy, and my own soul and motivation.

Almost two years into my journey, I wrote what I thought would be just a single article on exercise. A few months later, a friend suggested I write a short book on the topic. *Maybe someday*, I thought. I needed to keep learning and stick with it a few more years.

Now, almost a decade later, the time came. The short book is written and now available under the same title that friend pitched to me eight years ago: *A Little Theology of Exercise*.

I'm a pastor, not a personal trainer. My main interest in physical exercise is not weight loss, self-confidence, long life, or a better quality of life now. Those can be good things. But my main concern is how exercise can serve spiritual joy, and so glorify God, and make us into the kind of people who honor him through doing good for others.

To that end, consider a list of ten key principles I have learned on this exercise journey.

1. God made us to move and to meditate.

God made us remarkably flexible as humans. We are the kind of creatures who think and feel, and also move and act. Unlike other creatures, God made us for contemplation and for exertion, for pausing to ponder and for then acting in the world to accomplish tasks.

God designed us for rhythms of life: not always being on the go, not always being on the stay. We glorify God by reflecting on him and rejoicing in him and representing him in the world. We meditate and move. Typical human life includes both. God made us to be thoughtful and fruitful, to experience emotions and take up agency in the world.

2. No body is perfect.

All of us are sinners. Sin dwells in us and affects us, soul and body, in all our faculties. So, nobody is perfect. And *no body* is perfect: No one has a perfect physical body. Because of human sin, we live in a cursed world, and in this cursed world, none of us is without ailments or vulnerability to injury and disease.

Most of us know all too well, and all too painfully, how far from perfect our bodies are. And all the more with our fickle, less visible hearts. We all have weaknesses and various inabilities, some major, many very minor. In this fallen world, oh, how we should regularly thank God for whatever bodily abilities we have.

3. Our modern lives are far more sedentary than our ancestors'.

Read old books and see how timeless are the motions of the human heart and soul. Our inner lives still resonate deeply with the Psalms from three millennia ago. But how different our outer lives! Largely because of technology, we live far more sedentary lives today compared to biblical times, when they walked everywhere and had never seen a screen.

This is a good place to give a definition of *exercise*, which is a modern phenomenon (especially in the last 150 years). I'm gleaning this from Daniel Leiberman's book *Exercised*. Exercise is "voluntary physical activity undertaken for the sake of health and fitness."

As a pastor and editor, my work-life is very sedentary. Other than preaching and teaching, I'm usually at a computer screen or sitting in meetings. If I don't undertake "voluntary physical activity," I'll hardly do anything physical and soon be out of shape for the few important physical activities I do need to undertake.

4. 'Fitness' is a term Christians can appreciate.

When we think about fitness, the right question to ask is, *Fit for what*? Twice Paul gives us a useful phrase: "ready for every good work" (2 Timothy 2:21; Titus 3:1). Are you ready, in body and soul, to do good for others as needs arise? Are you *fit for good works*?

The healthy Christian life is no passive existence; we do well to keep this in mind in an age that constantly conditions us into greater and greater comfort and passivity. As J.C. Ryle observes,

> It would not be difficult to point out at least twenty-five or thirty distinct passages in the epistles where believers are plainly taught to use active personal exertion, and are addressed as responsible for doing energetically what Christ would have them do, and are not told to "yield themselves" up as passive agents and sit still, but to arise and work. A holy violence, a conflict, a warfare, a fight, a soldier's life, a wrestling, are spoken of as characteristic of the true Christian. (*Holiness*, xxiii–xxiv)

The Christian life requires rhythms of activity and rest. God not only made us as humans to meditate and to move, but he remakes us in Christ for both justification by faith alone and sanctification in the power of the Spirit.

5. Christian fitness orients not to looking good but to doing good.

In Matthew 5:16, Jesus says to "let your light shine before others, so that they may see" — see what? Your washboard abs? Your beach bod? No — "so that they may see *your good works* and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." You do them with such effectiveness and humility that others *see you* but give glory to *your Father in heaven*.

Our charge is to make physical exertion a means, among others, to spiritual health and joy. Many of us have found that regular bodily movement and exertion puts us in a better position to clearly see and deeply savor God in Christ and then do others good to show them Christ.

6. Exercise is an acquired taste.

This lesson comes not only from personal experience, echoed in the testimonies of others, but also from common sense. The joy of movement grows over time. As your legs and lungs become conditioned, putting them to work is less uncomfortable and more enjoyable. Let this be an encouragement if you've tried exercise, and it felt terrible. Give it some time.

God made our bodies to increase in energy through the discipline of expending energy. You increase your capacity by expending what energy you have, then resting, recovering, and doing it all over again. The first week or two will be the worst. But it typically gets better with time as you stick with it. For many, the payoffs become so enmeshed with the activity that exercise itself becomes enjoyable.

7. Exercise sharpens brain function.

As I've aged, this has been my biggest discovery, not just in my experience but in the literature I've read. As Harvard psychiatrist John Ratey writes,

> We all know that exercise makes us feel better, but most of us have no idea why. We assume it's because we're burning off stress or reducing muscle tension or boosting endorphins, and we leave it at that. But the real reason we feel so good when we get our blood pumping is that it *makes the brain function at its best*, and in my view, this benefit of physical activity is far more important — and fascinating — than what it does for the body. Building muscles and conditioning the heart and lungs are essentially side effects. I often tell my patients that *the point of exercise is to build and condition the brain*. (*Spark*, 3)

Exercise boosts alertness and clarity of thought and richness and depth of feeling. While it doesn't produce *spiritual joy*, exercise sure helps in the pursuit of spiritual joy by honing our minds and tuning our hearts.

8. Pushing the body conditions the will.

Pushing yourself in the discomfort of exercise trains your will to not give in so quickly when you experience resistance. The hills that matter most in life are typically the hardest ones to climb, and pushing your body to climb or run hills conditions your will to engage and endure the relational and emotional hills we encounter in life and work and Christian mission.

9. We tend to overestimate what can be done in the short run and underestimate what can be done in the long run.

This principle is true with training the body — and perhaps all the more with conditioning the inner person. The body is very condition-able. You just can't do it all at once. If you're out of shape, you can't get yourself ready for a marathon by next week. But it's amazing how you can reshape and condition and change your body over six months. Imagine what you can do in six years.

The power of habit is unleashed by small, doable, daily actions and modest upkeep over time — not crash diets and unsustainable resolutions.

10. God means for us to *pray* to him about and for our exercise.

God intends that we make our bodily life holy through hearing what God says in his word and responding to him in prayer. Paul writes in 1 Timothy 4:4–5:

> Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is *received with thanksgiving*, for it is made holy *by the word of God and prayer*.

We make bodily life *holy* by hearing what God says in his word about our bodies and their movement and then by responding back to him in prayer. And two kinds of prayer are mentioned: (1) receiving his gift of bodily life and movement *with thanksgiving* and (2) *asking him*, in response to his word, to make our bodily activities *holy*, to consecrate them to his use and honor in our lives.

Praying over meals is a good habit. God also would have us pray over the rest of our bodily lives as well, including exercise.

Whether your life is utterly sedentary, or you're a world-class athlete, perhaps prayer is your next step. Would you begin with prayer about your body and its exercise? And as God leads you forward, consider how you might *make holy* your bodily life for your joy in God and the good of others.