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JUNE 27, 2021

Glorify God with Your Body
How Exercise Serves the Christian Life





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"Some of us imagine the Christian life as being sedentary," a good friend commented to me, "more about sitting than standing, talking and listening than anything causing exertion."

We were discussing the New Testament commands to love and good works. Contrary to any assumption that life in Christ is lived mainly in living rooms and coffee shops, you don't get the impression early Christians were sitting around all the time. Although we welcome the charges to meditate, study, and be still in God's presence, we also encounter the teachings of Jesus, Peter, James, and Paul, one after another, who send us moving into gospel-informed, faith-fueled lives of meaningful activity.

Devoted to Doing Good

For starters, just consider what the apostle Paul had to say to his young associates Timothy and Titus. The rich in this present age, he writes, are not to sit on their wealth but "do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share" (1 Timothy 6:18). And Titus should be active too: don't *only* teach but "show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works" (Titus 2:7). Not simply a model by what you *don't* do but by the *good works* you do.

Paul expected both sound *words* and good *works* from his protégés. And he expected all Christians would be not just *willing* to do good but be "*zealous* for good works" (Titus 2:14). He wanted to make sure that those who profess faith are "careful to devote themselves to good works" (Titus 3:8). The problem with the false teachers in Crete was this: "they profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are

detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work" (Titus 1:16). Conspicuous by contrast, Paul says, "Let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful" (Titus 3:14).

For both Timothy and Titus, the apostle crafted a phrase that we would do well, especially in our sedentary age, to pray would be true of us: "ready for every good work" (2 Timothy 2:21; Titus 3:1).

Ready to Do Good

Readiness to do good might sound easy enough in theory, but practically it's a calling that our times can make difficult. In our world of flesh and blood, and now automobiles and screens, physical and emotional components accompany the spiritual in our readiness to do good. Christian good works begin in the soul, in hearts captured by Christ, in faith receiving his benefits, in desire to draw attention to him, in love wanting to do others good.

Then come these bodies. There's no way around them. Will they be barriers to doing good or *ready to act*? When needs arise, will our wills be primed to break the inertia of our inactivity? When love calls, will our bodies be ready to move, with hands and arms not too bulky and not too flabby, that can reach and lift and pull and push? Will we be ready with feet and legs that feel life and energy as they move, rather than sitting inactive? Will I be ready and willing to make use of this body God gave me, or have I imbibed the pattern of the age to keep it on the shelf and use it as little as humanly possible?

A body at rest remains at rest unless acted upon by a force.

God Prepared a Body

God did not design and build our human bodies to be liabilities. They are precious gifts, crafted and sustained by God, to enable us to live and *do good*, for his glory, in our world. Jesus says, "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). This requires bodies.

Not only are our bodies "not meant for sexual immorality," as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6:13, but positively, they are "for the Lord" — and added to that, "the Lord [is] for the body." God is pro-body, *for the body*, not anti-body, not suspicious of bodies. He gave his own Son a human body — why? As a vessel for doing his will in the world. Hebrews puts the words of Psalm 40 on the lips of Jesus, who says to his Father, "A body have you prepared for me," and then, "Behold, I have come to do your will, O God" (Hebrews 10:5–7).

Present Your Body

So we too have bodies, prepared for us by our Father, to carry out his will in the world, to do good with our bodies, to use them to advance Christ's kingdom and glory in bodily acts prompted by faith, and words that give meaning to our acts. We not only have negatives to avoid, but a great positive to pursue: "glorify God in your body" (1 Corinthians 6:20).

We are to *present our bodies* as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1) — and *present our members* not as instruments of sin but of righteousness (Romans 6:13). Will that be active or sedentary? Most likely, and most often, it will take at least some modest movement, effort, exertion, action — sometimes vigorous action. We marshal our members and muscles to move around in the world, legs striding toward need, in the call of love, hands extending to help.

The question is not whether we Christians need our bodies to carry out our God-given calling in this physical world, but will we *be ready* to use them as each new day presents us fresh opportunities? Or will we let our age condition our bodies to slow us down, to keep us still, to feel like liabilities rather than assets in the call of Christ?

Will we be "conformed to this world" and its sedentary defaults, and let it flatten our faith and calling, or will we be "transformed by the renewal of your mind" so that we will not only be able to "discern what is the will of God" (Romans 12:2) but also *be ready and able* to present our bodies and do it?

Fit for What?

Christians can appreciate the modern term *fitness*. To call an active, able, healthy human body *fit* implies that the body is not an end in itself. It's not for just looking at in photos or on stages, but for *doing* something, moving, taking actions, accomplishing tasks in the world. True *fitness* means our bodily ability serves other purposes. The body is *fit* to do something. The question is, *Fit for what?*

In Christ, we have far better answers to that question than secular workout culture and its false gods. For one, as Paul wrote to his protégés, we want to be "ready for every good work" (2 Timothy 2:21; Titus 3:1). We want to be ready to move and display God in his world. Ready with hands and arms, with feet and legs, that pulse with energy and eagerness, and feel life, not exhaustion, with every movement. Ready with minds and hearts and wills that would rather move than lounge, rather get up and go and have something to do than just sit there on a screen, rather move into the world and work to help people than calculate how we might move as little as we can.

In Christ, in the service of love, we want to get (and keep) our bodies, in their various seasons of life, in the modest condition needed to serve God's callings on our lives to love others. We want to be the kind of people who *want* to do good for others, and have the *ability* to do it gladly, knowing that such good often requires exerting our bodies in ways that are uncomfortable, and even unthinkable, if we are lazy and unfit.

Modest Upkeep

Lest we become deluded about the dignity of our bodies in this fallen age, C.S. Lewis has a balancing word for us about "Brother Ass," as he called it. Our bodies are "both pathetically and absurdly beautiful." They are "a useful, sturdy, lazy, obstinate, patient, lovable and infuriating beast; deserving now the stick and now a carrot." And to accent our calling to make good use of these bodies is not to dishonor disability, but to dignify it as real loss and pain and trial.

Yet being real about our limitations, and disabilities, doesn't mean accepting the sedentary assumptions of our age.

In Christ, we have stumbled upon the Treasure hidden in the field (Matthew 13:44). We now hold the Pearl of Great Price (Matthew 13:45–46). We have tasted the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord (Philippians 3:8). Enjoying *this life*, as the end, is pathetically small. Enjoying *Christ* is a worthy, indeed vital, goal, now and forever. This is our life. He is our life.

And that enjoyment of Jesus is sweetened by the *modest* use and upkeep of these bodies. God didn't make them to sit around only. He made them to meditate on his words, and then move into the world, toward needs. And movement not only makes us healthier and happier, but facilitates our calling to love — and in so loving, in the name of Jesus, our joy in him deepens and expands.

And *modest* upkeep will do the trick for most of us. Unlike our world, and its extremes, we have a higher calling, flowing from the very purpose of God himself in the universe, to put Brother Ass to work in the service of love, to the glory of God.