

INSPIRE²⁰²⁰

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN FAITH AND FITNESS | SATURDAY 01.25.20



Q & A with DAVID MATHIS

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Without fail, every general session speaker we've asked to present at an INSPIRE conference is experiencing their first invitation to come to a conference that has biblical body stewardship as its focus. None has even heard of a conference such as this. Is this the case for you?

Yes, it is! The topic definitely caught my attention!

John Piper, the founder of desiringgod.org, has famously advocated for Christians to enjoy more of God. How do you see body stewardship as either supporting or detracting from this pursuit?

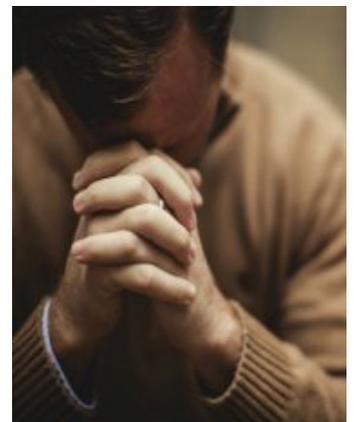
If body stewardship detracted from the pursuit of enjoying more of God, I'd be done with it. I exist, you exist, to glorify God. So, as the apostle Paul says, "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). And one of the key truths for which we stand at Desiring God — and perhaps the most distinctive one — is that we believe enjoying God is essential to glorifying God as we ought. To enjoy him is to glorify him. To be bored or uninterested in him is to dishonor him. And so, vital for our fulfilling the very purpose and calling of our lives is our enjoying, delighting in, being satisfied with who God is for us in Christ.

This means body stewardship stands or falls for me on whether it supports the pursuit of joy in God. The little bit of intense exercise that I do, and the little ways that I seek to be mindful about what I eat (and I could do so much better on the eating!), is in its highest and best form about enjoying God, which glorifies him, and making myself maximally useful to bless others in acts of service and love. I would go so far as to say that any exercise regimen or diet that purports to "glorify God" but does not aim to support the pursuit of greater enjoyment of God, is at best inadequate, if not deeply flawed.

As a rationale for pursuing a more fit and healthy life, where would you rank this motive of enjoying more of God amidst the many motives available? Why?

For me, as you may be able to tell, it's far and away number one. I am not mainly motivated by living longer. "To depart and be with Christ . . . is far better" (Philippians 1:23). And I am not motivated much by looking fit and healthy. For me, as a Christian, those motivations are inadequate. For me, perhaps the driving motivation under the banner of enjoying more of God, is the energy I get from expending energy. When I exercise regularly, I feel better. I feel like I can think clearer. I seem to sleep better. I'm generally happier. I don't know how much of it is just the endorphins or not. But whatever it is, regular exercise puts my body and soul — and their mysterious relationship — into better position

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to clearly see and deeply savor who God is. And I feel stronger and more ready to exert effort, whether mental or physical, for the sake of others. I've also found that pummeling or disciplining (Greek *hupōpiazō*) my body, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:27, strengthens my will, and chases away laziness, in all of life. Regular exercise makes me more active, rather than passive or lazy, in every sphere and every relationship — not the least of which is relating to God through his word and prayer.

How have you addressed body stewardship issues at Cities Church, if at all?

Hmm, I don't recall us saying much at this point, in our little five-year-old church. We are relatively young, and we're urban. By and large, the temptations for our congregation may be more in the direction of hyper-attention to the physical body, rather than neglect. I do remember that as we preached through 1 Timothy 4 last spring, one of our deacons, who was once a world-class weight-lifter, did a short "exhortation" for us one Sunday. His main point: "If athletes will go through intense training for a temporary benefit, how much more should we train for godliness, which promises a better reward both today and for eternity?"

What does your own diet and fitness regimen look like as a pastor, husband, and father?

For me it's pretty simple at this point. I'm a father of four, ages nine to two. Going to a gym isn't very realistic. So I run. In the summer, I run outdoors. In the Minnesota winter, I run on a treadmill in the basement. I try to run every other morning, or at least three times each week. With little kids in the house, it's hard to eat well all the time. In fact, I eat well very little. As the kids get older, I expect to be able to be a little pickier at times about food. I hope to be able to add some more weights into weekly training. But for now, I do what I can with little ones in the house. And that means getting myself up earlier than everyone else and making the most of pre-dawn time for Bible meditation, prayer, and exercise.

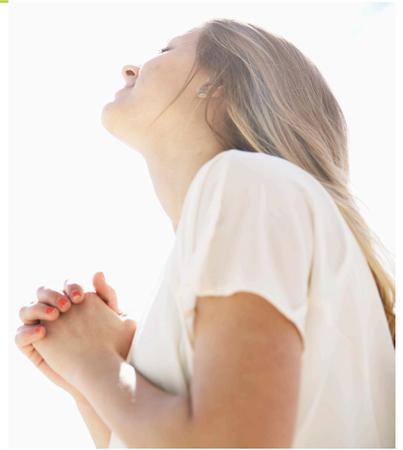
Your book, *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines* examines ways we can enjoy Jesus more fully by exposing ourselves more fully to God's Word, through prayer, and in fellowship with other believers. What do you believe is the greatest hindrance to discipline in the lives of modern-day believers?

I'm doubtful I should speak as an authority to the single greatest hindrance, but I could offer some possible barriers from my limited vantage. The mention of "modern-day" brings to mind (1) our break-neck pace of life and (2) our constant and ever-increasing temptations to diversion and distraction. Looking back now, we can see how our world changed in 2007 with the advent of the smartphone. As distracting as the television could be (for all its benefits) in previous generations, it's been just the last decade-plus that we've been carrying around these mini-TVs in our pockets. And the internet and apps offer so many more options for diversion than mere cable TV.

Also modern life is fragmenting our lives like never before. We live in one place, work in another, go to school elsewhere, play somewhere else, and do our shopping still somewhere else. And then on Sunday mornings we get in these big boxes with wheels and drive half an hour or 45 minutes to church once a week. Our everyday spheres overlap so little with those we covenant with in the local church, that we are stretching New Testament fellowship to its breaking point.

None of these hindrances are insurmountable, but they are aspects of modern life we should observe and take seriously and intentionally push back against at points in community, going the extra mile to commit to each other in the local church, and show up even when it's inconvenient, not taking the easy excuses out.

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Do you believe there is a physiological component to our ability to pursue depth in our relationship with God?

Indeed. The depths of the human soul are enigmatic. The joys and sorrows of our bodies can buoy or weigh down our souls. And the highs and lows of our souls affect our bodies as well. The stewardship of our bodies is not inconsequential, but significant, in the care of our souls, and vice versa. We know that “bodily training is of some value,” and godliness all the more (1 Timothy 5:8) — but one of the reasons I take “bodily training” with such seriousness, rather than ignoring it, is precisely because of how it serves the joy and strength and stability of my soul.

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In your presentations at INSPIRE2020 (general session and breakout) as well as your message to The Mission Church the following day, what do you hope will be the biggest actionable takeaway for attendees?

I want to help people know and enjoy Jesus more. As a pastor, that often means I’m writing and speaking about Jesus himself, or teaching portions of the Bible, or commending various spiritual disciplines. This conference is unusual for me. I’ve written, but never spoken, on the topic of stewarding our bodies to the end of knowing and enjoying Jesus more. I’m excited to do that. My appreciation for exercise and “bodily training” is not as an end in itself. I’ve found personally that exercise serves my soul, and I’m eager to commend that to others — to serve their growth in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18).



INSPIRE 2020

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THE MISSION CHURCH
12001 Ridgmont Dr. Urbandale