

INTRODUCTION

Happy New Year! What a blessing to begin a new year on the Lord’s Day. Of course New Year is the time people make resolutions. I read one person’s resolution that said: “I resolve that before I criticize anyone this year I will walk a mile in their shoes. That way, they’re a mile away and barefoot. Of course, the #1 resolution each year is to lose weight. I like what Jay Leno said about that: “Now there are more overweight people in America than average-weight people. So overweight people are now average, which means you have already met your New Year’s resolution.”

Someone sent me a funny picture of a fat cat filling a basket that was splitting. The caption said: Resolution A: Lose weight. Resolution B: Buy a bigger basket. Sadly most people end up buying a bigger basket! But this message is to help you if you’re interested in losing weight and become more fit in 2012.

In 1989 Stephen Covey published the book *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. It has sold over 15 million copies. It’s an intriguing idea to discover that effective people practice certain habits, and if you start practicing those same habits, you can be more effective. Over the next three weeks I’m teaching a series called “Habits of Healthy Christians.” There are certain habits that fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ practice. If you want to improve your spiritual effectiveness, then you should consider practicing these simple habits. Experts say it takes 30 days to start a new habit, so by the end of January, you could be on your way to a new you.

Today we’re talking about physical fitness. Next week we’ll talk about soul-fitness and the message is entitled “Soul Food: It’s Good for You.” In two weeks, we’ll focus on spiritual health and I’ll talk about “How to Stay Spiritually Sharp.” Also, on that day I’ll be talking about “Seven Reasons Why the World WON’T end on December 21, 2012.

The key passage for this series is found in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24.

“Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil. May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.”

In this message it’s my goal to convince you that physical fitness should be the desire of every Christian. Don’t just take my word for it. Dr. Kenneth Cooper, who first introduced the word aerobics in 1968, just celebrated his 80th birthday and he is still fit and working hard. He writes: “Our body truly is the Temple of the Holy Spirit, and we owe it to God and to ourselves to keep it in good shape.”

Jennifer Jennings is a Green Acres member who realized eight years ago she was overweight and out of shape. She lost more than 100 pounds and dropped 14 dress sizes, and is a certified fitness instructor. Her physical transformation came from a spiritual transformation. She refers to herself

as a fitness evangelist. She says, “I am learning to love and value myself and others...getting stronger inside and out. I am a new creation, and it shows on the outside. The change happened in that order and I will share the good news the rest of my life.”

Let’s talk about how God can bring about a change in your life in the area of physical fitness.

1. We are made in God’s image as a tri-unity

In order to be a healthy Christian, you must understand how God made you. There is one God, but He exists as a Tri-unity. We usually use the shortened version “trinity.” God expresses His nature as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In the first chapter of the Bible we read, “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness.’” (Genesis 1:26) We see God’s tri-unity in the fact that He said, “Let US” instead of “Let ME.” To be created in God’s image doesn’t mean we look like Him, it means we’re designed like Him. “The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground [body] and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life [spirit], and the man became a living being [soul].” (Genesis 2:7)

Understanding that you are a tri-unity is one of the most basic beliefs that you must embrace, because it affects every area of your life.

The word in the Bible for your physical body is *soma*. The word for soul is *psuche*, from which we get our English word psychology. The innermost part of your being is your spirit. The word is *pneuma*, which also means “breath, wind, or air.” Our word pneumatic is derived from that.

With your body you relate to the world beneath you, the physical world. With your soul you relate to the world around you, the social world. With your spirit you relate to the world above you, the spiritual world. When your body is right, you’re healthy; when your soul is right, you’re happy; and when your spirit is right, you’re holy. When you’re healthy, happy, and holy you have achieved God’s plan for your life.

All animals have bodies and souls. But only human beings, God’s highest creation possess a spirit. It is our spirit that causes us to seek something bigger and better than ourselves. It may direct some toward art or music or a life of service. It is our spirit that moves us to worship. Human beings are the only creatures who worship. We’ve all heard of Cowboy Churches, but have you ever heard of a Cow Church? Nope, and you never will because cows aren’t moooved to worship their Creator like we are.

This message focuses on physical health. Your body is an amazing creation. The Bible says in Psalm 139 that God knit you together in your mother’s womb, and that you are fearfully and wonderfully made.

In a 24-hour period your heart will beat more than 100,000 times. You have so many blood vessels that if they were all stretched out end-to-end they would wrap around the equator. Twice. So in an average day your blood travels 168,000 miles. You will move and use over 700

muscles, and generate 450 tons of energy. In an average day you will speak 4,800 words, if you are a man—slightly more for the ladies! Your body contains over 10 trillion cells and each one is more complex and intricate than the New York City power grid. You really ARE fearfully and wonderfully made. To claim that you are a biological accident is about as likely as an explosion in a junkyard miraculously resulting in a perfect Boeing 747.

2. Practicing health and fitness is an act of worship

God gave you only one body, and you should take care of it. A man celebrating his 92 birthday said, “If I had known I was going to live this long, I’d have taken better care of my body.” What shape is your body in?

I realize people struggle with this issue. My desire is NOT to be your travel guide for another guilt trip about your weight. I don’t want to be seen as a slave driver who cracks the whip to make you feel guilty about your physical condition. Instead, I want to encourage you to approach this issue from another direction—from the perspective of God’s Word. I’ve struggled with my weight for years, and I’ve learned some things to share with you that can help you make some small changes that can lead to big results.

In addition, I am fully aware that for some of you, physical fitness isn’t an option because of a certain handicap or debilitating illness. Paul struggled with a physical problem he called his “thorn in the flesh.” When God didn’t remove it, he decided to boast in his weakness, so the power of Christ would rest on him. So, God only expects each of us to do the best we can with what we have.

We all need to know that obesity is a problem in America. America is the most overweight country on earth. Caitin Rose observes: “If health is wealth, America is going bankrupt. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than one-third of adults and one sixth of children in America are obese. In the past twenty years, obesity rates doubled for adults and tripled for children. If these trends continue, by the time today’s children reach adulthood, obesity will be the norm and healthy weight the exception.” (*Obesity in America*) It’s even hard to get statistics on weight because studies have shown most people lie about their weight. They claim to be taller than they really are and weigh less than they actually do.

Even in light of this obesity epidemic, there is also a fitness craze happening as well—but there’s nothing crazy about it. It makes great sense. Over the past fifteen years the number of fitness gyms have almost doubled in America. People want to shape up for a number of reasons. For some, it’s vanity. They want to look better. For others, their motive is health; they want to live longer and better.

But for Christians, fitness isn’t just about vanity or living longer. It is about honoring and worshipping God with your whole person: body, soul, and spirit. We have a higher motive for physical fitness. The Bible calls on us to offer our bodies to God’s service. God isn’t looking for fitness models; He is looking for people whose bodies are healthy and strong to serve Him. So, for us, it isn’t about looking good, it’s about loving God.

The Bible says, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.” (Romans 12:1) When Paul wrote these words many people embraced the Greek philosophy that the body was totally separate from the soul. The soul was good and the body was bad. You could do anything you wanted with your body as long as you tried to keep your soul pure.

The members of the Roman Senate would spend their evenings in the most degraded debauchery imaginable. They threw the first toga parties. But the next day, they showed up as respected Senators to conduct the business of government. They believed what you did with your body didn’t matter as long as your mind was right. It sounds like the philosophy of a lot of Americans today! But the Bible teaches that God isn’t just interested in our souls, He wants to redeem our bodies as well.

What kind of living sacrifice are you making to God when you present your body to Him? Is it holy and pleasing? If you have room to improve the fitness of your body, then there are some healthy habits you can follow.

3. You honor God when you follow a healthy plan of diet and exercise

In the Bible God says, “Those who honor me I will honor.” (1 Samuel 2:30) Not only did God create your body, but He also redeemed your life, including your body. Centuries ago, God had a Temple in Jerusalem where His glory dwelt in the innermost room—the Holy of Holies. Today, God lives in the innermost room of Christians—the Holy Spirit inhabits our spirit. In other words, in the Old Testament God had a temple for his people, today He has a people for His temple.

The Bible says, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

Sometimes people say, “It’s my body, I can do with as I please.” Not really. We have been bought with a price. Even today, many Christians suffer from what I call an Edifice Complex. They mistake this building for the dwelling place of God. They would never do anything to desecrate this building. But they don’t realize that their body is the real dwelling place of God.

Our tendency is to look at others and judge whether or not they are a fit temple for God, when we ought to be looking at ourselves.

I read a blog by Neil Christopher, the son of a pastor and who leads a ministry to young people who don’t fit into mainstream culture. He writes: “I cannot count how many times I have seen overweight Christians waddle up to some poor kid with piercing, tattoos, weird hair, or clothing that does not meet their approval and wave their fat little fingers in their face and quote 1 Corinthians 6:19. He continues: “Seriously, how can [they] teach self-control?”

If you want to change your lifestyle to being more physically fit, it doesn’t take rocket science. It simply involves a change in your diet and exercise. How do you start? It takes a desire and then

dedication. You’ve got to want to improve your health; then have the discipline to stick with it. Self-discipline isn’t easy, because the default response of your flesh is laziness. The disciples were right when they said, “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Your spirit says, “Go out and exercise!” Your flesh says, “Chill out and knock off those dozen donuts.” The spirit says, “Get out of bed, and go work out.” Your flesh says, “Hit the snooze button, and roll over.”

Paul realized the importance of self-discipline. He wrote, “Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we are imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” (1 Corinthians 9:25–27 ESV)

Paul said he disciplined his body, so he would not become a slave to his body, but instead he could keep it under control. He didn’t run without a finish line, or box by just beating the air; he had a plan a purpose. He made a commitment that his appetites and the natural laziness of the flesh would not master him.

Since this is a series on habits, let me give you some practical advice on changing your habits in the areas of diet and exercise. First, if you are looking for a change in diet to consider, let me recommend the Daniel Diet. Of course, before you start any diet, you should consult your health care professional. I discovered the Daniel Diet when I was preaching through Daniel 12 years ago. I discovered it the same way Columbus discovered America: It was there all along.

Daniel was taken from his home in Israel when he was a teenager and deported to Babylon to become a servant of the King. He was part of a large group of young men, and they were offered rich food; the royal food that the King enjoyed. We’re not told what was on the menu, but Daniel objected to it. His boss told him he had to eat it. Daniel suggested an experiment for ten days for him and his three amigos, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. The Bible says, “Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables [The Hebrew word is *zeroim*, which means any food that comes from seeds] to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food... At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables [*zeroim*] instead. (Daniel 1:12-16)

The Daniel Diet doesn’t require ordered food or counting calories. For ten days, you drink only water and any food that comes from seeds. That pretty much includes anything that grows out of the ground. You can eat as much fruit, vegetables, grain, and nuts as you like. If your doctor approves this diet, try it and see if you don’t feel better, and you’ll lose weight without really trying. I’ve done the Daniel Diet many times and it always makes me feel much better. I could easily become a vegetarian if I didn’t love steak and Chick-fil-A so much!

You and I have a choice each day about our diet. Unless you’re a preschooler or a child, nobody is telling you what you’ve GOT to eat. Their appetites control some people, and others control their appetites. I’ve always been fascinated with something that Paul wrote in Philippians. As he was describing certain enemies of the cross, he wrote, “Their god is their belly.” (KJV). Here’s the full verse: “Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their

god is their stomach...their mind is on earthly things.” (Philippians 3:18-19 NIV)

That’s a pretty powerful image to consider. Do you ever allow your stomach to direct your life? The greatest value of fasting is that it is always connected with prayer. In the Bible, it’s always prayer and fasting—in that order. The second greatest value of fasting is that when lunchtime rolls around your stomach growls, “It’s time to eat!” And even though you’re probably not hungry, you listen to that rumbling. When you’re fasting you can smile and say, “Hush, belly, I’m calling the shots today, and instead of eating, I’m going to pray.”

Most of us KNOW the right way to eat, we just don’t. For instance knowledge is knowing that apples are good; potato chips are bad. But wisdom is the ability to apply that knowledge to your life.

In addition to diet, exercise should be a habit in your life. I know many of you are already exercising, because I see you on Rose Rudman trail where I run. I’m not really speaking to those of you who are already exercising as a habit. Instead I want to use every bit of persuasive skill God can give me to challenge those of you who aren’t regularly exercising to start.

You’re never too old to start. Most of us don’t think we’re really old. I read a list of things to prove if you’re old the other day and it taught me that I’m old.

You’re old if you can remember:

1. Soft drinks only came in bottles and you could get a deposit back.
2. Gasoline was 26 cents per gallon and ethyl was high at 30 cents.
3. Nobody owned a purebred dog.
4. Coffee shops had tableside jukeboxes.
5. Telephone numbers had a word prefix.
6. Refrigerators were still called “the icebox.”
7. Coke bottles had names of cities on the bottom.
8. Letter jackets and sweaters were only for athletes.
9. You not only didn’t wear a seat belt, but you slept on the rear hat rack!
10. When the Beatles appeared on the Ed Sullivan show!

So, even if you’re old, you’re not too old to start exercising. There are many great exercise programs out there. But as a special incentive, we are doing something every day starting tomorrow to encourage people to get off their seat and onto their feet.

A good goal for exercise is 40 x 4. That means forty minutes of exercise a day; four times a week. Even if you’re already exercising I want to invite you to join us starting tomorrow morning at 6:00 right here in our building for a prayer walk. Even if you’re a mall walker, or a trail walker, or a street walker...wait, forget that one. Join us at 6:00 a.m. by entering the main front door of the weekday entrance. We have a route mapped out inside with no stairs. There will be posters to give you prayer requests for each lap; we only ask that you don’t close your eyes when you pray!

I know it's early and your flesh will say, "Stay in bed." But you need the exercise and we need the prayer. I'm going to be checking to see who makes it all five days, Monday through Friday.

Then on Saturday we really ramp up our exercise opportunities. We are hosting a Fit Fest—no that doesn't mean you can come and pitch a fit—you can come and GET fit.

It starts at 10:00 a.m. in the One-Ten Student Center with a BodyVive class, which is low-impact cardio exercise. At 11:15 there will be a BodyPump class, which incorporates light weights to aerobics. The program is set to exciting music and it is for all fitness levels for both men and women. At 1:00 there's a Zumba class, which is a dance/exercise style with a Latin flair. BodyPump will be offered again at 1:00 p.m. and there will be a Boot Camp class at 2:00 p.m. All day long there will be a health fair with blood pressure checks and nutrition info. At lunch we'll be serving double-meat Whataburgers. Not really.

I'm going to be there for everything. I'm doing every class, so I hope to see you there!

CONCLUSION

Everyone has habits. Some are bad and some are good. Habits are patterns of thinking that started with a trickle in your brain, and then became a larger flow until it turns into a mighty river. You can build a dam to stop bad habits and redirect them, and you can dig new channels in your mind for good habits. The choice is yours. A new year is a great time to make changes.

There's a scene from "Forrest Gump" where he is celebrating New Year's Eve with Lieutenant Dan and a couple of girls. Forrest is drinking a Dr Pepper. For you movie buffs, the year is supposed to be 1971, but his Dr Pepper bottle bears a logo that didn't come out until the mid-1980s. One of the girls is watching the ball drop at Times Square. Obviously she's a sad girl with more mileage than years. You can see it in her eyes that she regrets her poor choices. As she watches the TV she says, "Don't you just love New Year's? You get to start all over. Everybody gets a second chance."

New Year is a great time to make some changes. Will 2012 be the best year of your life? You can only answer that a year from now on January 1, 2013. But you will greatly improve the possibility that 2012 will be your best year if you embrace these habits of healthy Christians.

G.K. Chesterton was an English writer whose works had a great influence on the Christian conversion of C. S. Lewis. He is responsible for my very favorite reflection on starting a new year: "The object of a New Year is not that we should have a new year. It is that we should have a new soul. Unless a particular man made New Year resolutions, he would make no resolutions. Unless a man starts afresh about things, he will certainly do nothing effective. Unless a man be born again, he shall by no means enter into the Kingdom of Heaven."

Don't just make a resolution, because most of them go in one year and out the other. Instead, will you make a commitment to your Lord that you will develop some good habits that will make you a healthier Christian? It's up to you.

OUTLINE

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The Daniel Diet

by Dr. David O. Dykes, Pastor Green Acres Baptist Church, Tyler, Texas
Companion to Bible message #817, given on January 9, 2000

The Daniel Diet is based upon Daniel 1:12-16. As a teenager, Daniel and his three Hebrew friends refused to consume the King's rich, royal food and wine. Instead, he determined to eat *zeriom* (NIV translates it "vegetables," KJV translates it "pulse") and to drink only water.

Zeriom is the plural form of the Hebrew word that comes from the root word *zeroa*, which means "food that comes from seed." This would include fruit, vegetables and grain, which comes from seeds. It would exclude meat, dairy products and sweets.

For ten days, Daniel and his friends participated in a test to prove that this is a healthy diet. At the end of ten days they were healthier than the other teenagers.

In 1992, I read this and tried the "Daniel Diet" for myself. The Daniel Diet is unique in that it gives a time period (ten days) and a menu (fruit, vegetables, grains and water).

When I am on the Daniel Diet, I eat fruit, vegetables (including a few potatoes, since they are grown from seeds) and some unprocessed grains, usually whole-wheat pasta or brown rice. I don't eat meat, dairy products or sweets—and very little or no bread. I drink water (also unsweetened coffee or tea, since they are grown from seeds).

A typical daily menu would include: **Breakfast**—grapefruit and coffee; **Lunch**—salad with lemon juice for dressing—or a vegetable medley—with fruit for dessert. **Dinner**—Whole-wheat spaghetti with vegetarian (marinara) sauce or whole grain rice smothered in RoTel tomato sauce with black beans. Snacks consist of all kinds of fruit.

There is no "book" on this diet—use your imagination—eat all the fruits and vegetables you want, with grain being the third and smallest component of the diet. Try it for ten days, yourself.

I always feel great while I'm on this diet and I can generally drop about ten pounds, especially when coupled with a program of walking or other exercise.

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If you borrow the majority of a message or outline, I encourage you to simply preface your remarks by saying something like: ***“Some (or “much” as the case may be) of the ideas I’m sharing in this message came from a message by Pastor David Dykes in Texas.”*** This simple citation may prevent any criticism that may be directed toward you.

To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes