

INTRODUCTION

The most common resolution each New Year is to exercise more. Some people are fitness fanatics, but a lot of people have a love/hate relationship with exercise. I came across some funny fitness sayings by people who seem to have an aversion to exercise. One person wrote, "I named my dog 'Five Miles' so I can tell people I walk five miles every day." Another wrote, "I do five sit-ups every morning. It may not sound like much, but there's only so many times you can hit the snooze button." Someone else wrote, "I'm up to forty minutes on the exercise bike. Next week I may start pedaling." Someone wrote: "For exercise I do diddly squats." Another wrote, "Somebody asked me if I do crunches. I said, 'Yes, this morning I had Captain Crunch and Nestlé's Crunch.'" But my favorite is someone who wrote, "I signed up for an exercise class and they told me to wear loose-fitting clothes. If I had any loose-fitting clothes I wouldn't have signed up in the first place!"

In this series we've noted that physical fitness serves you in this life only; but spiritual fitness prepares you for eternity. Paul wrote to Timothy, "Bodily exercise is all right, but spiritual exercise is much more important and is a tonic for all you do. So exercise yourself spiritually, and practice being a better Christian because that will help you not only now in this life, but in the next life too." (1 Timothy 4:8 TLB)

So during this month, we're focusing on Spiritual Fitness: Ten Habits of Healthy Believers. I have given you a guarantee that if you attend every Sunday in January or if you have to work or travel, listen to the message by podcast or on our website, you will be a stronger Christian who is more excited about Jesus than ever before. If you aren't, then your old stuck-in-the-mud faith will be refunded.

The church was born on the Day of Pentecost when Peter preached the gospel and 3,000 were saved and baptized on one day. Then beginning in Acts 2:42, we read about how the early church functioned. In this passage there are ten characteristics of a healthy church and a healthy believer.

"They devoted themselves to [1] the apostles' teaching and [2] to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and [3] to prayer. [4] Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. [5] All the believers were together and had everything in common. [6] Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. [7] Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. [8] They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and [9] enjoying the favor of all the people. And [10] the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

We've already examined four of the Healthy Habits. Each one is stated as a personal profession. Let's read them together:

1. I apply the truth of the Bible in my daily life.
2. I regularly engage in Christian fellowship.
3. I make prayer a daily priority.

4. I trust God to do the impossible.

In this message we are going to continue our list and talk about Healthy Habits numbers five and six.

5. I JEALOUSLY GUARD THE UNITY OF MY CHURCH

“All the believers were together and had everything in common.” When brothers and sisters are living their lives in unity with one another, it is a beautiful thing. In Psalm 133:1, the Bible says, “How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell together in unity!”

It’s hard to define unity. It has to be experienced to be understood. It’s like the word “kiss.” Have you ever read the dictionary definition of a kiss? “A compression of the closed cavity of the mouth with a slight sound when the rounded contact of the lips with another is broken.” Wow, doesn’t that sound exciting? But if you’ve ever been a kisser, or a kissee, you know that a kiss is better than a definition of a kiss. It’s better to experience unity than to define it. Let’s notice two things about unity.

A. Jesus prayed for us to have unity

The night before Jesus was crucified, He prayed for us specifically in John 17. I can say that He was praying for us because He prayed, “I don’t pray for these disciples alone, but for everyone who will believe because of their testimony.” That’s us. And Jesus prayed that we would be unified.

“May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (John 17:23) Why did Jesus pray that we might be unified? So the world could see that there is something supernatural about the Christian life. The world is used to arguing and fighting, but when they see Christians dwelling together in unity, the world feels a need to check it out.

One reason the world often scoffs at the church is because there is so much division and animosity in churches. There are hundreds of churches where the people have argued and fought often leading to a “church split.” For instance, I can take you to a little town in Alabama where there is a Harmony Baptist Church. But the members got in an argument about something and some left and started New Harmony Baptist Church. Then after a few months, that group started fussing so they divided and some of them started a third church named Greater New Harmony Baptist Church. It sounds like there wasn’t much harmony there!

Unity is often difficult, because there are sometimes mean people in the church. Some people are born again and others seem to be born against. They’re against anything that is proposed that may be new or different. A little church was remodeling their sanctuary and one old codger argued about the color of the carpet and which side the piano and organ should be on. The committee proposed that the church add a chandelier. He stood up and said, “I’m against it. I don’t want us to have anything I can’t spell. And if we got a chandelier, nobody would know how to play it, and besides, what we need is more light in this place!”

B. The Spirit creates unity, but we can break it

To understand what Christian unity is, it's important to know what unity *isn't*. Unity isn't uniformity. There are some groups that think all Christians should look the same, dress the same, smell the same, and worship exactly the same way. In fact, there is a church in East Texas that I've been told has a barber shop in it and when a man comes to Christ, they give him a Christian haircut? What's a Christian haircut? Did Jesus have one? The Body of Christ is wonderfully diverse, and that's what makes unity so beautiful.

Second, unity isn't man-made unification. Just bringing two groups together or two people together is a union, but it's not the same as unity. Vance Havner used to say you can tie two cats together by their tails and you'd have unification, but you won't have unity!

Unity isn't uniformity or unification. It is a bonding that only the Holy Spirit can create. What unifies my heart with yours is that fact that the Holy Spirit bears witness with my spirit and with your spirit that we are children of God. So only the Holy Spirit of Jesus can create unity between believers, but the Bible makes it clear that it is possible for us to mess up this beautiful unity. That's why Paul wrote, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4:3) The word "keep" in that verse is a picture of a Roman soldier on sentry duty guarding something valuable. Our job is to stand guard and try to maintain that unity and make sure we would bite our tongues before we would say something that would cause a rupture in the unity. We should do everything we can to lovingly deal with those who may be disrupting unity.

I'm happy to report that Green Acres Baptist Church is a loving church where there is unity. Our staff members love and respect each other in a spirit of unity. Our deacon body is made up of Godly men who are unified in their love for the Lord and His church. Our committees and ministry teams are unified in their desire to be servant leaders. So, if you are considering joining our church and you are going to be a troublemaker, I know a good Methodist church around the corner I'd recommend you join!

In the 18th Century, John Fawcett wrote a great song we sang at the end of every Lord's Supper in the church where I grew up. The song says: "Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love; the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above." That's the unity of the Spirit, so will you join me in jealously guarding the sweet unity here in our church?

6. I JOYFULLY SHARE THE FINANCIAL RESOURCES GOD GIVES ME

The Bible says these first believers were "Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need." This was a generous congregation. Whenever they saw a financial need in the church, they generously gave their money to meet those needs. Many believers give to God's work. Many others give generously to God's work. But a Healthy Believer gives joyfully and generously. The Bible says in 2 Corinthians 9:7 that "God loves a cheerful giver." The word "cheerful" is *hilaron*, where we get our English word "hilarious." God wants your giving to be such a joyful experience that you will giggle when you give.

To be a joyful giver, you must understand the three pillars to God's Economy. Many of you know a lot about the American economy and even the global economy. But God's economy has always been around and it will exist long after this world's economies have been forgotten. God's economy is never subject to a bull or a bear market; it's always up!

A. God is the source of every penny that you manage

God gives all of us some of His wealth for us to manage. We must always remember that every penny comes from above. In 1936 Bing Crosby sang a song, "Pennies from Heaven" in a movie by the same title. The movie was a bust, but the song was a hit. It received an Academy Award for Best Original Song and became the #1 hit in a nation suffering through a terrible economic depression. It was song about looking for the good in the midst of the storms of life. The lyrics said, "Every time it rains, it rains pennies from heaven. Don't you know each cloud contains pennies from heaven...So when you hear it thunder, don't run under a tree. There'll be pennies from heaven for you and me." For Bing, that song meant mega-bucks from heaven. But when you break it down, every penny, nickel, dime, and dollar comes from heaven, because God owns everything and He is the source of every good gift.

It's difficult for hard-working Americans to admit that they didn't EARN their money. They want to argue and say they worked hard to build up their net worth. God has a word for that attitude in Deuteronomy 8:17, "You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth."

Let's say you made \$1,000 last week. How much of it belongs to God? All of it. The Bible says, "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it." (Psalm 24:1) In Haggai 2:8 the Bible says, "'The silver is mine and the gold is mine' declares the Lord Almighty."

B. God created you to be a channel of His wealth, not a container

So God shares some of His wealth with each one of us. Our job is to manage it wisely. The difference between a channel and a container is important. A channel is a body of water that connects two other bodies of water so boats and people can move through it. A container would be a farm pond, or a swimming pool that only receives and holds water.

Jesus said we shouldn't store up treasures on earth because moths and rust will destroy them and thieves will steal them. But the truth is we are a nation of hoarders. All of us keep much more stuff than we need. We store stuff in our closets, our attics, and our garages. And then when those places get full, we store our stuff in self-storage units. This has been one of the fastest growing businesses of the past decade. There are 48,000 self-storage facilities, and 10% of American households are renting one. Compare that to the countries that have the second highest number of self-storage facilities: Canada is second with 2,000 and Australia is third with 1,000.

I'm not at war with self-storage units. I realize some of you are making money on self-storage, and you're using that income to honor the Lord. Good for you. And I realize there are often times when a family needs a storage unit because of death or relocation. But the vast majority of those

who rent storage units are just hanging on to stuff they don't use any more. So, do you have excess stuff you could give away to others?

There is a great cycle of giving. When you give, God gives back to you. Jesus said, "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." (Luke 6:38)

In other words, God gives to you and He wants you to give it away, then He'll give you more to give away. The more you give away; there more there is to give away. This doesn't make sense in the world's economy, but remember this is God's economy.

You can't outgive God. If you give away with a teaspoon, God gives back with a teaspoon, but His teaspoon is bigger. If you give away with a cup, God gives back to you with a cup, but it's a heavenly sized cup. If you give away with a dump truck, God gives back with a dump truck—and His truck is bigger. If you give away with a supertanker, God's supertanker is bigger. You can't outgive God, but you will go through life with a smile on your face if you TRY to outgive God. We're to be a channel of blessing not a container!

C. When you honor God with your giving, He will meet all your needs

One of the great promises of God is "those who honor me, I will honor." (1 Samuel 2:30) You don't have to wonder how you can honor God because one of the clearest ways to honor God is found in Proverbs 3:9-10: "Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine."

You honor God when you give Him the first and the best of what He provides. Firstfruits were the best and first crops harvested and taken to the Temple as an offering. The problem with many Christians is they spend God's money on everything else and then look to see if there are any leftovers to give to God. You don't honor God by giving Him the leftovers. You honor God by giving to Him first.

The Bible has a good starting place, and it's called tithing. Tithing is not a religious word, it's simply a math word, like the words half, or quarter. A tithe is a tenth.

God had a complaint against Israel at one time and even claimed they were robbing Him. They said, "How are we robbing you?" God said, "In your tithes and offerings." Then in Malachi 3:10 we read, "'Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,' says the Lord Almighty, 'And see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.'"

This is the only place in the Bible where God invites us to test Him. So I invite you to put God to a test. Do you want to honor God and have the floodgates of blessing opened into your life? Here's my challenge: If you're not yet tithing, try tithing for six months. Don't give God the leftovers; give that tenth to God first each pay period. And at the end of six months, if your life is not MORE blessed, and then come to me around the middle of July and we'll talk about it. If it's

true, that you are less blessed after honoring God for six months, my pledge to you is that I will lay down this book and resign as pastor of this church. Because that would mean Malachi 3:10 isn't true, and if Malachi 3:10 isn't true, how can we be sure that John 3:16 is true? Now I happen to believe both verses are true, so I'm not worried. I've issued this challenge for the last twenty years and it's never failed. The ones who honor God tell me about how God blesses them when they start tithing.

You may be thinking you can't afford to tithe. In order to honor God, you should try the 10-10-80 plan. It's not rocket science. 10-10-80. Give God the first 10%. Save the second 10% and manage your expenses to live on 80% of your income.

I have ten pennies. How many of them belong to God? All ten. But to acknowledge that, give God the first penny. Then take the second penny and save it for a rainy day. Wise money managers save part of their income every month. Then you discipline yourself to live on the other eight pennies.

CONCLUSION

Sir John Templeton founded the Temple Mutual Fund in 1954. He was a brilliant investment advisor, and his fund merged with Franklin Funds in 1992 to become Franklin Templeton Funds. Today they manage about \$850 billion. John Templeton was a committed Christian who was once asked what the greatest investment he ever made was. He said when he started tithing his income to the Lord's work that was his greatest investment.

He was once asked about the effect of tithing. He wrote: "I have observed 100,000 families over my years of investment counseling. I always saw greater prosperity and happiness among those families who tithed than among those who didn't." (*Tithe: A Living Testimony*, Andrew McNair)

So if you want to be Healthy Believer, you must jealously guard the unity of your church. You must also joyfully share the financial resources God gives you. I mentioned a couple of weeks ago that Nick Saban, who coaches the Alabama Crimson Tide, really doesn't focus on winning games. He has his team focus on the process, the steps to excellence. They set goals for exercise, passing math exams, eating right, practicing with excellence. When all these details are done with excellence, the result is winning. These ten habits are the basic building blocks to becoming a mature follower of Jesus Christ. As you commit yourself to living them out on a daily basis, you'll find you have victory in Jesus.

OUTLINE

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



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