

Pursuing Spiritual Fitness

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Introduction.

- A. In the United States, we're weird about physical fitness. I doubt there is another nation on earth that spends so much on everything from running shoes to gym memberships, yet is so hopelessly out of shape. The problem is the difference between our goals and the amount of effort we're willing to put into them. We all want to have the bodies of Hollywood movie stars, but we don't want to have to work for them. It reminds me of a commercial that was on a couple years back. It depicted an overweight man getting on a scale in a gym and looking down to see that he weighs 220 pounds. He jogs around the gym for about ten seconds, then eagerly climbs back on the scale, hoping that he has already lost weight. If only it were that easy, folks!
- B. However, the challenge of becoming physically fit is not the most important challenge we face in our lives. Now, I don't mean to minimize the importance of eating healthy and losing weight; those things are something we need to do, and there are plenty of folks in this auditorium right now who have the scars on their chests to prove just how important they are. Nonetheless, the fact remains: physical fitness may be as serious as a heart attack, but spiritual fitness is even more serious. None of us have a shot at living forever here on earth, but we do have the opportunity to live forever in heaven, and that's an opportunity we must seize.
- C. Sadly, the same problem presents itself in the spiritual realm as in the physical realm. All of us want to go to heaven, but we don't necessarily want to put in the work that it requires. That's why so many religious folks believe that all they have to do to be saved is to pray the sinner's prayer. It's easy! It's the spiritual equivalent of those late-night infomercials that promise you a perfect body if you use the Ab-Ripper 3000 for five minutes a day. In the real world, neither ab-rippers nor sinner's prayers are going to get the job done. If we want to go to heaven, we must invest consistent, significant effort in getting there. Let's examine this effort this morning. Let's see what we have to do to pursue spiritual fitness.

I. Why Bother?

- A. As we ponder this topic, though, the first question that logically presents itself to us is, "Why bother with spiritual fitness at all?" As we've already made clear, the process of getting our souls in shape is not an easy one. What makes the effort so necessary? It reminds me, actually, of something I went through in late September 2005. On the 22d of that month, my wife and I hurriedly loaded clothes and our most precious belongings into our cars and raced out onto the roads, only to be stuck in the worst traffic jam I have ever seen in my life. It lasted literally all day. There was no gasoline to be had for love nor money, so we turned off our engines and our air conditioners and sweated at a dead stop for hour after hour in the hundred-degree Texas heat. It was one of the most miserable days of my existence, yet at the time, I was determined not to be anywhere other than where I was. Why? Because Hurricane Rita was coming up from the Gulf of Mexico, and it was due to hit Beaumont in less than 48 hours. It was too dangerous to stay where I was.
- B. Similarly, friends, it's too dangerous to stay where we are spiritually because **JUDGMENT IS COMING**. Let's look at the picture that Romans 14:11-12 paints of this judgment. Unlike Hurricane Rita, we don't know when judgment is coming. Nobody has Jesus on Doppler radar, but that does not change the fact that He will return, and when that happens, all of us will be judged. This is not a driver's ed test we're talking about here. This is an all-knowing God considering everything we have ever done and everything we have ever thought, looking for any evidence of sin in our lives, and then, if He finds it, condemning us to eternal punishment.
- C. This is a fearful thought, friends, and we need to prepare for the time when the record of our lives will be examined. Worse still is the fact that if we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that of our own resources, this is a test we will fail. All of us have sinned, and even if we live the rest of our lives perfectly, the sin that we have already committed will merit the death penalty from God. We cannot save ourselves. Only **JESUS CAN SAVE US**. We see Paul's description of the importance of Jesus in Romans 5:8-9. For our sin, someone must die. We can choose to bear that penalty for ourselves, or we can choose to have Jesus bear it for us. By the mercy of God, if we become Christians, God will look at the death that Jesus died on the cross and consider the debt of sin that we owe Him to be paid in full. It is tragic that God's own Son had to die for things that we have done, but that sacrifice is our only hope for escaping the wrath of God.
- D. However, if we want to avoid the punishment that we have earned, it's not enough to just name the name of Christ in baptism and go on doing whatever we want. Even after we have become Christians, **WE CAN FALL AWAY** from the grace of Christ. The Hebrews writer describes this process in Hebrews 10:26-27. This is not talking about the sins that we commit even though we're trying to remain faithful to God. This is talking about the sins that we commit after we've given up on being faithful to God. Once we reach that point, we have begun to sin willfully, and as the Scripture says, Christ will no longer serve as the sacrifice for our sins. If we don't obey Him, He will no longer save us. That puts us right back at Square One, only worse. Before we

became Christians, we may not have known that we were subject to the judgment of God. After we become Christians, however, we do know, and if we fall away, we know exactly what's going to happen to us. We have to live with the terrifying expectation of a judgment that we know will destroy us. That's scary stuff, friends. I can't read this section of Hebrews 10 without the hair standing up on my arms, but it's the truth.

- E. This emphasizes, friends, how absolutely necessary it is that we persevere in serving our Lord, how critical it is that we stay in the race to heaven. If we want to build up this essential spiritual endurance, there's only one way to do it. **WE NEED TO TRAIN** ourselves to be spiritually fit. Paul talks about his own training process in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. He purposefully trained his spirit so that he could go to heaven. In fact, he put a lot of effort into it. This is the apostle Paul we're talking about here. This is one of the giants of the first-century church. And yet, this great man was deeply concerned about the possibility that he himself might fall away. If the apostle Paul was that concerned, how concerned should we be? How hard do we need to be training?

II. How to Do It.

- A. Obviously, friends, each one of us needs to be determined to go to heaven and to get ourselves in shape to go there. Here are four simple ways that each one of us can train to make it. First, we need to **ASSEMBLE** with the saints at every opportunity we have. There are some things in life that baffle me, friends, and one of the baffling things shows up on that number board to my right every week. Every week, we have about 100 people at services on Sunday morning, and every week, we have about 60-70 people at services on Sunday night. Now, I understand that sometimes, people's work schedules don't allow them to make both services. I understand that sometimes, we have sick kids at home we have to take care of. I understand those things, but somehow, I don't think that our 30 absences every week are all explained by work and sick kids. I think that some of our 30 absences every week are people who choose to be elsewhere, and that I just don't get.
- B. Perhaps the problem we wrestle with in this is that we don't understand just how hard it is to get to heaven, and just how easy it is to go to hell. The Bible tells us in 1 Peter 4:18 that the righteous man is only saved with difficulty. Coming through these doors every time they're open is not enough to guarantee us heaven. Why, then, would we possibly run the insane risk of showing up once a week, if that? Let's look at how frequently the Jerusalem church came together to study. We see this in Acts 2:46. They met in the courtyards of the temple day by day, and they weren't showing up to play bingo. They had other things they could do with their lives, too. Satan always has his distractions. These Christians, though, ignored the distractions, because they were determined to train themselves to go to heaven.
- C. Similarly, we need to train ourselves for heaven through **STUDY**. Look at how the psalmist describes his study in Psalm 119:103-104. In this little two-verse chunk, we see both his attitude toward the Scripture and what the results of his study were. First of all, he did not regard reading the Bible as some dry, boring chore. Instead, it was something that he enjoyed, something that he delighted in. Most likely, this is because he realized what study of the word did for him. He knew that reading the law of the Lord had a direct and dramatic impact on his life. It gave him the understanding he needed to avoid the temptations that Satan placed in his path. It gave him the wisdom to avoid sin. This is something we need to seek for ourselves too. Our enemy is subtle. He's been entrapping people and enslaving them for thousands of years, and he will use every trick in the book to entrap and enslave us as well. We can't let him, and one of the best ways we have to fight off Satan is by constant, renewed study of the Bible and application of its message to our lives.
- D. Next, we also make ourselves spiritually fit when we **PRAY**. This is another gift from God that Christians too often misunderstand and fail to apply fully. First of all, we see that the early Christians prayed frequently. The Scripture speaks of Peter and John going to the HOUR of prayer in Acts 3:1. Duration is important, but so are the subjects of our prayers. It's fine for us to give thanks for our food before we eat. It's fine to pray for the sick. Indeed, we have examples in Scripture of God's people doing all of these things. However, physical blessing and needs are not what most prayers in the New Testament are about. Instead, when we consider the recorded prayers of men like Jesus, Peter, and Paul, we see them praying about SPIRITUAL things instead. They primarily thank God for their spiritual blessings and seek His help for their spiritual needs. How often do we pray like that? When was the last time we asked God to help us or someone else grow in Christ? If we aren't offering prayers like that, we're not using prayer to its fullest potential. Let's pray like Jesus did.
- E. The final common way that we can pursue spiritual fitness is when we **SERVE**. There are too many Christians out there who are book Christians and not real-life Christians. They come to church, they read the Bible, but they don't look for ways to put what they learn into practice. If we truly want to be disciples of Jesus and walk in His footsteps, one of the most important things we can do is to train ourselves to manifest the love of Jesus, not just occasionally, but constantly. Consider Paul's injunction on the matter in Galatians 6:9. Both in the church and outside of it, there are numerous needs that we have opportunity to fill. There are plenty of people in this congregation who could be helped immeasurably by just having someone to talk to every once in a while. Let's remember that. Let's look for ways through love to serve one another.

Conclusion. If you are not spiritually fit, now is the time to begin your training.