

Faith and Health

**Two Sermons Offered by
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**Part 1
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There is a vital connection between our faith and our physical and mental Health, one we don't talk about much, and it's not the direct connection that we might suppose. Just as some misguided people still think poverty and natural disasters are punishment from God, at one time faithful people believed that disease was divine retribution for human sin and that mental illness was caused by demons. We don't believe that anymore. We have germ and gene theories of illness and neurological explanations for many mental disorders. And we can see how sinful habits naturally lead to bad consequences. If you live too hard for too long, it's not God's fault when you get sick. As Mickey Mantle once said, "If I'd known I was going to live this long I would have taken better care of myself." So we would never say to someone who is sick, "You must have done something really bad to deserve this," or "Just have more faith and you'll get better."

We do believe, however, that God wants us healthy and that part of our calling as Christians is to do whatever we can to promote healthy living in ourselves and others. It's part of being good stewards of creation.

We don't normally think of the Bible as saying much about caring for our bodies and emotions. But in a few places the connection between faith and health is crystal clear:

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Thessalonians 5:23 NRSV

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 NRSV

In other places in the Bible we find sound subtle instruction on how to live as healthy as possible. What do experts tell us makes for a healthy lifestyle today? Rest. Good nutrition. Exercise (outdoors in the sunshine, if possible). And freedom from worry and stress. The Bible talks about the importance of all these things.

In fact, people in Jesus' day lived healthier than we do in many ways. Their Kosher diet was rich in fruits, vegetables, olive oil, and fish – all things that we now know are good for us. And their relative poverty, compared to today, made overeating and obesity a virtual impossibility for all but the richest people.

They got plenty of exercise, everyday – almost all of it in the sunny outdoors. They didn't need to join a health club; just getting from point A to point B, demanded that they work their muscles in the sunshine, which is known to improve our moods, especially this time of year. Psychologists tell us that widespread depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem is a relatively modern phenomenon; you don't hear much about it in the Bible. Maybe their active outdoorsy lifestyle had something to do with it.

They knew how to rest, too. They took the Sabbath seriously and understood the need for the mind and body to rest for 24 straight hours each week. And they got a whole lot more sleep than we do. Think about it: in a society with no electricity you tend to go to bed when the sun goes down and rise when it comes up. How many of us get 8 or more hours of sleep every night – how about 10 or 12? You'll won't find "Thou shalt burn the candle at both ends" in the Bible, but many of us act like it's a commandment – we even stress ourselves out for God, and it's making us sick and tired.

They prayed regularly, in good times and bad, and felt intimately connected to God. Long before Facebook and counselors, their faith and their large extended families provided the support, guidance, and sense of community that we all need. This kind of living isn't just faithful and Biblical, *it's good sense.*

Don't you feel better when you're eating right, getting plenty of sleep, vigorously exercising daily, going outdoors regularly, avoiding caffeine and alcohol, praying constantly, and living with your large extended Christian family? I wouldn't know either, because I don't come close to living that way on a daily basis. But I must say that when I do at least some of these things, for shorter or longer stretches at a time, I do feel better, both physically and mentally – and this changes my relationship with God, for the better. I'm more likely to count my blessings than recite my complaints. I have more energy and my outlook is better. It's easier to believe that "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." I wonder how many Christian soldiers leave the battlefield each year because we simply aren't caring for ourselves well enough – physically, emotionally, and spiritually – to stay healthy for the long haul.

If our bodies are Temples of the Holy Spirit, then caring for them is as much a spiritual discipline as prayer. How are you "glorifying your body" as an individual? When you get a chance, check out the sermon discussion questions (Below). When so many people are hurting and in need, let's do what we can to be healthy and strong for them, for God, and for ourselves. Amen.

Faith and Health – Sermon Discussion Questions

In what ways do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "God cares as much about how we care for our health (both physical and mental) as how we care for each other."

How would you rate your physical health on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being highest)?

How would you rate your mental health (i.e. emotional health) on a scale of 1 to 10?

Do you have patterns of behavior that keep you from becoming more healthy physically or mentally? In what ways are you contributing to your own physical and mental dis-ease? (e.g. Do you cultivate stress in your life? Does entertaining always involve food for you?)

What would it mean for you to take your physical and mental health as seriously as you do your spiritual health? What changes would you need to make?

In what ways are you living Biblically (i.e. living healthy) through regular exercise, spending daily time outdoors, consistently getting enough sleep, eating a nutritious diet, and praying regularly?

What is one thing you will do this week to live out your faith by living healthier?

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