

Together Exercise Daily in God
“Body and Soul, Sole and Body”
Dialogue based on I Timothy 4:6-8
Creekside Church of the Brethren
July 23, 2006

David:

When Johnny Carson hosted the tonight show he played a telepath-in-a-turban named, “Carnac the Magnificent.” Johnny’s co-host, Ed McMahon, would say, *“In his mystical way, Carnac will now ascertain the questions having never heard the answers.”* Holding a sealed envelope to his forehead he said, “Bible belt.” The question was, “What holds up Pat Robertson’s pants?”

In my hand is a sealed envelope. The answer is, “Sometimes, surely, always.” The question is, “Can we enjoy a relationship with God?” There is no limit to how God can address us, but we need receptive spirits and the knowledge that nothing worthwhile comes without effort.

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul says, “Exercise daily in God—no spiritual flabbiness, please!” What is good for the body is good for the soul. We want spiritual fitness and communion with God, but it takes effort and availability, and you know how that goes...

Vicki:

It’s a battle every day – Exercise. I’ve had a gym membership for over 26 years. Now I have two memberships – one here and one in Florida. And I’ve been more or less faithful to a regimen of physical exercise throughout that time. I’ve had several occasions of backsliding – for weeks or even months at a time. Like I said, it’s a battle every day. I tell myself, I’ll get up at 5, be at the gym when the doors open at 5:30 and walk my two miles on the treadmill. Or ... I’ll leave work at a reasonable hour and head straight for the gym. Sometimes it works. Other times it’s next to impossible.

David:

There are days, and there are *days*, aren't there? Having a relationship requires time in another's presence. A recent survey revealed that in Great Britain, parents spend, on average, 19 minutes a day with their children. Mothers are working longer and fathers are watching more television.

Without priorities we are pulled in every direction. Enjoying God's love and doing God's will get shoved aside. The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard observed that we are seduced by the perplexities and complexities of the world. He said our great need is to simplify and direct every facet of our lives to, "will one thing." That "one thing" is to seek first the Kingdom of God and remain committed to God in everything we do.

Bible reading, prayer, worship, service—it takes effort to work it all into our schedules... or should I say, "It takes effort to work our schedules into the Christian disciplines."

Vicki:

Why is it so hard? Why is it that "the good" is always so difficult? Maybe I'm alone in this. Maybe other people love to exercise, hit the ground running – so to speak, but not me. I'm kicking and screaming and finding more important distractions along the way to keep me from it. Then I remember – hey! It's good for me! My doctor says it's good for my heart; it's good for my bones. Research says I'll live a longer, healthier life if I exercise moderately to vigorously at least 30 minutes five days a week. I'll have better emotional health too. All I know is, I do feel better *leaving* the gym than when entering it.

I play a little game with Larry when we walk together. About halfway, on really humid days when I would have rather sat reading the paper, I say: "Are we there yet?" Depending on how hot, tired, or just plain not *into* walking – I may say it three or four times until I get to thinking of something else to talk about. Talking does make the drudgery go faster.

David:

Acedia is a little Latin word that means “indifference.” It’s close to the word *sloth*, which has to do with the refusal to experience joy. Exercise can be drudgery. Spiritual exercises can become drudgery, too, and when it feels that way, there’s no joy in it.

Thankfully there are also times when it’s different. Whether walking, jogging, praying, or worshipping, it’s not a burden. As a monk said about prayer, “A life of prayer is a life of beginning all over again.”

Vicki:

I have learned that I have to be intentional about exercise. I have to *plan* my schedule to include it. Because when I say, I’ll work out “when I have time” – then I *never* have time. Life intercedes – other priorities make their way to the top of the list. It’s easy for me to let exercise take a back seat – because like I said, **IT’S A BATTLE EVERY DAY!!**

Priorities and intentionality really go hand in hand. I know deep down that exercise is not a priority for me, so it’s very easy to let other things move ahead to the top of my “To Do” list. I know this is true because even in the summer when I have lots of free time, going to the gym is not on the top of my list. Like a Jewish friend of mine always says, “So you’ll get that great looking body a day later than you planned.”

David:

Maybe you should give yourself more than one day.

Vicki:

Where does this discipline of exercise end anyway? When will I know I have arrived? What will I accomplish over the long haul? Well, I’m here to tell you, it doesn’t end and I’m probably not ever going to “arrive” with that perfect body. But my blood pressure is in a good place, I’m keeping my cholesterol in check, and I’ve decided it’s more about the journey and not the destination.

David:

I'm glad you mentioned, "arriving." On this side of life we all are spiritual beginners. Why should we think that we come to an end point in our growth, even in heaven? *Retirement* is not a biblical concept. Christians do not get retirement parties. Jesus doesn't absolve us of our discipleship when we reach the golden years. We study, pray, serve, and keep growing to the end... and beyond!

Vicki:

Spiritual exercise has two sides to it. There's the personal side and the corporate or the, "Together" side. I'm going to talk about the importance of the personal side of our relationship with Jesus.

It's personal because . . . well, because it's personal. It's intimate. Who knows us better than God? Who knows our inmost thoughts? Our fears? Our deepest desires? Our greatest disappointments?

I *must* be if I want an intimate relationship with the Lord. I have to remember who God is. In a crowd, at work, at the grocery store, even at church, we can put our game face on – our public persona. We smile and say "please, thank you, I'm fine, how are you? And have a nice day" without even taking a breath to hear if the other person *is* fine. Because if they are playing the game by the same rules as I am – the script is already written. But in a personal relationship with God, the mask comes off. God already sees us as we are, and in a truly personal relationship, we will let our guards down and let God speak to us – in whispers, in silence, in music, and in the words of scripture and in the teachings of Jesus.

David:

That's right. Jesus said that God cares for us personally. If God knows when a sparrow falls from the tree, God certainly knows what is happening in *our* lives. God is determined to have us like the shepherd was determined to find one lost sheep.

Vicki:

In our personal relationship we have to create space for God to enter. Sometimes that space is silence. I won't speak for you, but I don't like silence. I want to fill it up to the top with noise. The TV, the radio, conversation. Let's take a little test:

Close your eyes. No peeking and no counting. I'm going to say "start" and I want you to raise your hand when you think one minute is up. Close those eyes now. No cheating. START!

Now some of you had your hands up after 15 seconds, others 30, some never put your hand up. For some of you, it was the longest minute of your life. It was an eternity for me. Fear that you would tune out, or a pastor's worst fear, that you'll go to sleep. The point is many of us (myself included), don't like silence. We think of it as something to be filled usually with noise or at least activity. But my point is this. If we truly want a personal relationship with Jesus, what did I say earlier? It has to be intentional and it has to be a priority.

Make an appointment with God. Start tonight before you go to bed. If you're a morning person, set the alarm for five minutes earlier and do it first thing. Spend five minutes being really awake in the presence of God. Don't ask for anything. Just say, "I'm here Lord and I'm listening." Then be there. And listen. And if lightning doesn't strike you and you don't hear a heavenly choir singing the "Hallelujah Chorus," don't be disappointed. If we haven't made it a discipline to listen to God, we may not hear him the first or even the second or 100th time He speaks. But, we have to keep that discipline going. A wise old sage once said, "What you want and what you get are usually two very different things. In prayer, spending time seeking the mind of Christ, we may not get exactly what we desire, but we will be blessed.

Being alone with God is a necessary pre-requisite to being present with other people.

David:

Right again! Prayer is as personal as it gets, but how can you discern if you have heard correctly? How do you know the voice

you hear is God's and not your own? What do you do when your prayer life dries up like a desert, you cannot pray, and it seems that God has left the premises? *"Purity of heart is to will one thing,"* Kierkegaard said. But we need to know whether the thing being willed is our thing or God's thing.

We relate to God one on one. But as Brethren, we also believe that we listen to God best when, *together* we exercise daily in God. In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul said, *"For the body does not consist of one member but of many... if one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together."*

Growing up, we were told to be independent, do our own work, and not rely on others. I know lots of miserable people who got that way because they tried to manage life on their own.

As the theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "The church does not need brilliant personalities but faithful servants of Jesus and the brothers and sisters that comprise it."

Vicki:

I said the personal part of our relationship is important because it's personal. Here's a very personal story to illustrate that statement.

Even though, I thought I was prepared for our move to Florida six years ago, I wasn't. Looking back I can see several reasons that I was oblivious to at the time. I had left my job of 24 years teaching at Jimtown where I had pretty much become the "Queen Bee" of the school. The day after my last day of school, my dad died very unexpectedly. All of my great "job opportunities" evaporated one by one until it looked as if I would be unemployed that first year. Then out of the blue – if you believe in "The Blue" (I don't) a job came to me handed on a silver platter. Did everything then fall into place? Absolutely not! Teaching that first year was worse than my first year of teaching because then, I was fresh out of college and I didn't know what I didn't know. But with 24 years of hindsight I knew what I should be able to do, but it seemed as if every effort took the strength of moving mountains. Larry can tell you that I left

for work every day before 7 A.M. and didn't return to until 5 P.M. or later. Going to the gym was out of the question. So much for physical exercise. I ate dinner and then I still had homework to do. With whatever time was left, I stared at the TV until bedtime and then the next day repeated the same thing as the day before. How did I survive? Every morning, I got out of bed and I spent 20 minutes in Bible reading, a daily devotion, and prayer. I had a gratitude journal that year. Every day I wrote five things I was thankful for. Some times I was thankful that the day before was over.

We can fake it with people. We can put on our public persona and act as if everything is fine. I did that. Every day, left foot, right foot, breathe. But God knows us – inside and out – better than even we know ourselves. I can't fake it with God because even when I try, He knows the real me. He knows when I'm hurting even when I don't admit it. But it's when I finally do admit it, that God can work a great change in my life just like He did in Florida with me and that's where that spiritual exercise comes in. And He can do the same thing in your life. That job that was given to me on a silver platter came complete with a loving, caring, committed staff of people who spent some time wondering whether they made a mistake hiring me but who also spent a lot more time on their knees supporting me in prayer, not to mention all the good people here at Creekside who did the same.

Sometimes, even if we're just going through the motions, that helps keep a connection open. I know it worked for me during the darkest year of my life. Having a daily, intentional, committed time of prayer and Bible reading along with being plugged into a community of faith kept my boat afloat.

David:

You weren't in it alone. Fellow teachers and the saints of two churches prayed you through that time. We are *together* as the church to help each other get through life to life.

One of the great entertainers of a generation ago was Jimmy Durante. He was asked to participate in a show for WWII

veterans, but said his schedule was full. However, if they wouldn't mind his doing a short monologue and immediately leaving for his next appointment, he would do it. Since a short show was better than none, they agreed.

When Jimmy got on stage, something happened. He went through the monologue and stayed. The applause kept building, so he stayed and did more material. The short monologue lasted a half hour. He took his last bow and left the stage. Someone asked, "I thought you could only stay a few minutes. What happened?" Durante replied, "*I did have to go, but I can show you the reason I stayed. Look down on the front row.*" There sat two men who had both lost an arm in the war. One lost his right arm, the other his left. Together they could clap loudly and enthusiastically.

As the Church of the Brethren byline says, we are—Continuing the work of Jesus, simply, peacefully, and together.