

THE PRINCIPLE OF EXERCISE I Timothy 4:7-8

INTRODUCTION:

This morning, I am going to be preaching about exercise so, to get started, let's do a little. I'm serious about this. I want you to do these exercises with me. First, I want everyone to stand up. Now, slowly blink. Where you are standing, turn 360 degrees to your left. Now put your right hand across your chest. You may be seated. This week when, someone asks you about the sermon you can say that it brought us to our feet, opened our eyes, turned us around, and touched our hearts.

Well, as I said, this morning, I'm going to preach about exercise. I know what you are thinking: "Just how blessed can we be? Here's a man who is the picture of physical fitness and he is going to reveal his workout regimen so we can all have buff, ripped bodies like he has."

I hate to disappoint you. I am not really going to tell you how to look like I do. Instead, I will be speaking about the exercises that make us spiritually fit – and that is a lot more important than being physically fit. And although I will be talking about spiritual fitness, I believe that you will find that there are some parallels between physical exercise and spiritual exercise.

I ought to confess that I did not invent this parallel between spiritual fitness and physical fitness. The apostle Paul told Timothy:

⁷Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. ⁸For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.

According to Merck Pharmaceutical, there are three major types of exercise:

1. Endurance (aerobic)
 2. Strengthening (resistive, formerly called anaerobic)
 3. And stretching or flexibility (range-of-motion) exercises."
- Merck adds, "Balance exercises are also important."

I wonder if we can find some parallels between the types of physical exercise that Merck Pharmaceutical recommends and the type of spiritual exercise that Paul would recommend that will bring eternal benefits. Let's look and see.

I. **ENDURANCE TRAINING (or aerobic exercise)**

The first type of exercise that Merck Pharmaceutical cites is endurance training or aerobic exercise. According to one on-line resource, "Aerobic

exercise is physical exercise that intends to improve the oxygen system. The term 'aerobic' means '*with oxygen*', and refers to the use of oxygen in the body's metabolic or energy-generating process. Many types of exercise are aerobic, and by definition are performed at moderate levels of intensity for extended periods of time."

But I also like that Merck term of "endurance training". It makes sense. I can run fairly fast in short bursts but I can't run long distances (like 10 to 15 yards or more) because I haven't developed the lung capacity and the cardio fitness to do exercise for extended periods. I would need to do some endurance training if I wanted to exert myself over the long haul.

In Hebrews 12:1-3, the epistle urges us to fix our eyes on Jesus and consider him so we will be able to endure to the finish.

12¹ *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.*² *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*³ *Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

Endurance training involves stripping down to the essentials. We are commanded to lay aside the sin that entangles but that's not all. We also have to lay aside everything that hinders us from a single-minded focus on Jesus. What kind of things could distract us from focusing on Jesus? Anything. Any THINGS could divert our attention from the Lord. Money. Houses and land. Things like popularity, power and position. Things like cars and careers. Things like cares. Bills. All kinds of things can take our eyes off of Jesus. Hebrews 12 says that if we are to endure to the finish, we must not let anything shift our focus off of him.

If we fix our eyes on Jesus, we can run with perseverance because his endurance will instruct us, will inform us and will inspire us to keep on keeping on.

We all could benefit from endurance training. Discipleship is easy for a moment but it becomes challenging over the long haul. If we want to endure, we must take our eyes off of the difficulties that would distract and fix them on Jesus. If we would persist, we must stop looking at the tinsel of the world and look at the tree: the tree upon which Jesus died. If we plan to persevere, we must shift our attention from the trinkets of this world to the treasures of the next.

At its simplest, endurance training is training ourselves to fix our eyes on Jesus and “*Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*”

II. **STRENGTH TRAINING (or resistive exercise)**

The folk at Merck also talk about strength training. It is interesting to me that this kind of workout is also called “resistive training”. I know what that means: it means exerting our power against resistance so we can stress our muscles and develop even greater strength.

Isn't that something? What an illustration! We gain strength by pushing against resistance. A weight lifter challenges gravity when he presses the barbell over his head. The cyclist challenges inertia when she keeps the bike in motion by pressing the pedals, otherwise it would coast to a stop. Every piece of exercise equipment in the gym operates on the principle of resistance. As people exert themselves against resistance, their strength increases.

In truth, very few people try to get fit just for the sake of looking muscular. There are bodybuilders who are only in it for the look but most people consider them to look a bit garish, exaggerated and extreme. For most people, function is the purpose of fitness. They plan to get in shape so they can do more.

In Colossians 1:9 -11, Paul told the Christians in Colosse about his prayer for them: his prayer that they would get stronger. Hear these words:

⁹ For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. ¹⁰ And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, ¹¹ being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.

Paul knew that the Colossian Christians had to be strengthened with all power so they could have great endurance, patience and joyful thanksgiving. Again, the principle is that we gain strength when we resist.

Satan tempts each of us...all of us. The more we resist him, the stronger we become against temptation. And when we give in and give up, we miss an opportunity to become spiritually stronger and morally fitter. We engage in strength training when we refuse to yield to Satan. As James 4:7 teaches, “*Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*” What a thought! As we submit to the Lord and as we resist the

Devil, we get Satan on the run and he wants nothing to do with us. Please engage in strength training by resisting temptation and resisting the tempter.

III. **FLEXIBILITY TRAINING (or range-of-motion exercise)**

Have you ever been in the hospital with a patient who was paralyzed or who was unconscious? I've been surprised to see the physical therapists come in and work with an unconscious patient. What they are wanting to do is maintain flexibility and range of motion so that when the patient awakens, he or she has not become physically rigid.

That is considered passive-range-of-motion because the patient is unable to move those limbs. But, in fact, we all need to do range-of-motion exercises so we can develop and maintain flexibility. For many of us, our normal daily activities require enough movement that we maintain a certain level of flexibility. But perhaps not enough. Some of us would do well to bend, stretch and flex a little more so we can become more limber and increase our flexibility.

Flexibility is very important. Without it, we can pull a muscle doing something routine or involuntary. I've heard of people throwing their back out because they sneezed. Or people who have pulled a muscle when they stretched to reach a high shelf.

Likewise, I've been impressed when I've seen senior citizens who can (and do) sit on the floor, touch their toes or otherwise demonstrate how supple they are.

Spiritually, we need to develop and maintain flexibility, too. In Ephesians 4:2, Paul commands us to be humble, gentle and patient and to bear with one another in love. In the very next verse, he tells us to maintain the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace. You know, none of that is possible without flexibility. We have to learn to be tolerant. We have to love in spite of our differences. We have to acknowledge that we are not always right and will not always be first. We must be kind and tender with one another. And none of that is possible unless we become flexible.

I suspect that the reputation of the church has suffered over the years because its members have not always been very flexible. The old adage is that the last words of a dying church are, "That's not the way we've done it before."

I know that it is not just churches. Any organization, like any organism, will die from a lack of flexibility. In scientific terms, we would call it calcification. Calcification is the process by which calcium salts build up in soft tissue, causing it to harden.

The heart must remain soft and malleable if it is to function properly. If the muscle hardens, it cannot pump efficiently and blood cannot circulate freely. The walls of the heart can become hardened by scarring. And I've known that to happen to people spiritually, too. There are a lot of folk who used to attend church but who don't now because they have been wounded in their soul. Their heart was bruised by some sleight or by something hurtful that someone said. Sometimes, it is because of a decision that was made with which they did not agree. Often it is because of a major disappointment they have experienced so they toughened up to try to prevent being hurt like that again. And before long, their heart became hardened. Sin can harden the heart. If we sin repeatedly, over time we become hardened to the Master's gentle knock on the door of our heart.

Now, just as the physical heart must remain flexible so we can live, in the same way our spiritual heart must remain flexible if we are to live for eternity. And that begins by being humble, gentle, patient and loving like Paul described in Ephesians 4:2

IV. STABILITY TRAINING (or balance exercise)

Merck Pharmaceuticals also speaks of the importance of stability training as a part of our exercise program. Stability training comes from balance exercises.

After Sandy's stroke, she had to learn to sit up all over again. Her equilibrium was affected by the brain damage and perched on the edge of the bed, she would wobble and topple over like an egg set on end. The therapists at the hospital did stability training with her to help her develop her sense of balance again.

Is it possible that you need some stability training? Is it possible that your sense of balance has been affected by the rough and tumble of this world? In II Thessalonians 2:15, Paul exhorts the Christians in Thessalonica to stand firm and hold to the teachings that were passed on to them. That is excellent counsel. We can get disoriented because of the many influences around us. Some try to tug us this way and some try to tug us that way. It is easy to wobble and to fall unless we have something firm upon which to hold. *"So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter"* Paul wrote. Hold firm to the Word and you will stand firm, you will be stable, you will maintain balance.

Most of us learned to sit, stand and walk long before we can remember. But we had to learn to do those things. We had to develop stability; we were not born with it. Similarly, we have to develop spiritual stability: it is

not automatic. We develop spiritual stability as we learn to cling to the Word of God and trust it in all circumstances.

CONCLUSION:

According to USA Today, only 31% of Americans get enough physical exercise. I guess I am a bit surprised that the number is as high as that. Also, according to USA Today, 40% of Americans get no measurable physical exercise at all. That one doesn't surprise me. Given the physical consequences of a lack of exercise, those figures are worrisome. As a nation, we need to get moving and get fit.

But you know what, for as bad as those numbers are, I suspect the statistics are even worse for the amount of spiritual exercise we are getting. Let's resolve right now that we will add regular spiritual exercise to our schedule because "*physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.*" Will you make that commitment with me? Will you resolve to get spiritually fit?

INVITATION: #566 – "*I Am Resolved*"