

Why Does My Body Matter to God?

First of six sermons in the “Daniel Plan” series

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- Daniel 1:1-16 ¹⁵When the time was up, they looked healthier and stronger than all those who had been eating the royal food. ¹⁶So from then on the guard let them continue to eat vegetables instead of what the king provided.
- Romans 12:1-2 ¹ So, brothers and sisters, because of God’s mercies, I encourage you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice that is holy and pleasing to God....
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: God gives us our bodies so we can best serve God’s purpose in the world.

If your mother ever said to you, “Put on your ‘Sunday best,’” would you know what she meant? It used to be that people had at least one set of clothes called their “Sunday best.” Whether you were a farmer or factory worker or school teacher or store clerk, you probably had one dress or shirt-and-tie that was set aside from your daily work or casual clothes. That set-aside outfit was not for ordinary wear; you saved it for going to church: your “Sunday best.” Time was that just about everybody wore their “Sunday best” to church, not to impress others so much as to signal to ourselves that the worship of God deserved our best attention.

Nowadays, of course, “casual Fridays” have carried over to Sundays. Most churches welcome worshippers in whatever attire is comfortable to them. As we offer ourselves to God through worship, we’re less concerned with outward appearance. Appropriately, we strive to clothe our hearts and minds in a spirit of gratitude, a willingness to follow, and a desire to serve.

Well, if our outward appearance isn’t so important in church anymore, why would our physical appearance – why would our bodies – matter to God?

That question – “Why does my body matter to God?” – is at the heart of a six-week sermon series I’m launching today. This series will highlight opportunities offered to all by a faith-based program seeking healthier living. It’s called The Daniel Plan. One-hundred fifteen people from this church and the greater community have committed to following The Daniel Plan for the next six weeks. But there is truth for each of our lives to be gleaned from The Daniel Plan, whether or not we’re formally in the program. Over the next six weeks we all will consider the importance in our lives of “Faith, Food, Fitness, Focus and Friends” – what The Daniel Plan calls “The Five Essentials” for meaningful and lasting change.

Many of you know the story about the origin of The Daniel Plan. Nationally-renowned mega-church pastor and popular author Rick Warren was performing baptisms one day – the old-fashioned style where adults kneel in a pool and are dunked-and-raised three times each. Pastor Warren happened to be doing 827 adult baptisms that day (I told you it was a mega-church!). Pastor Warren says that about halfway through all those baptisms he noticed three things:

1. He was getting tired, because
2. Most of the people he was baptizing were overweight, and
3. He himself was overweight.

He realized he had not taken care of God’s gift of his body. He had allowed his physical body to become rundown and out of shape. Actually, he had participated in its deterioration: he had eaten in ways that filled his belly but didn’t fuel his body, and he had allowed the machine of his body to fall into disrepair by lack of activity.

He’s not alone: 70% of American adults and 40% of American children are overweight.¹ “For the first time in history, as many people are suffering from the result of too much food as malnutrition. While

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/obesity-overweight.htm>, accessed 5/12/2017

millions of people suffer from not having enough to eat, millions are struggling with the effects of being overweight.”² The fantasy depicted in the 2008 movie “Wall-E” of a nation of overweight and out-of-shape people seems to be on its way.

This can’t be what God intended. Here are three reasons I believe that God respects and values our bodies: Creation, Incarnation, and Inspiration.

1. First, Creation. The book of Genesis presents the Bible’s theological description of how all that is came to be. Genesis reports that on the Sixth Day of Creation God created the human being. God said, “They will be like us and resemble us.”³ Obviously we don’t know what God looks like; I doubt God has a head, torso and four limbs. But that’s what God imagined for us. How can we exercise dominion over the created order if we so neglect and disrespect our bodies that we are too tired to stroll through paradise and too weak to cultivate the land?
2. The second reason I believe God respects and values our bodies is because of the Incarnation. That word means “putting on flesh” or “coming into flesh.” Incarnation is what God did in coming among us in Jesus the Son. Obviously God thought the physical body was of sufficient value as to take on human form.
3. The third reason I believe God respects and values our bodies is because of Inspiration, which literally means spirit or breath coming into someone or something. After his resurrection Jesus came to the apostles and said, “Peace be with you....’ Then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive people’s sins, they are forgiven....”⁴ Jesus put his spirit within them – he “inspired” them – to share God’s blessings with the world. And the apostle Paul told the Christians in Corinth, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and who was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourselves but to God; he bought you for a price. So use your bodies for God’s glory.”⁵

God gives us these bodies as masterworks of God’s creative power, as tools to serve the world in the name of Jesus, and as reservoirs of God’s Holy Spirit capable of shaping the world for God’s purposes and to God’s glory.

Many years ago we discovered that someone had spray-painted graffiti on the brick exterior of this sanctuary. If you saw such vandalism, such abuse of your church, don’t you think you’d cry out, “That’s a crime!” But think about our bodies that Paul called “temples of God’s Holy Spirit.” When we vandalize our bodies with overwhelmingly non-nutritious food and a sedentary lifestyle, isn’t that “crime” an offense to God who created us?

Let’s be clear: it’s not like we’re oblivious to our bodies. Society puts tremendous emphasis on physical beauty and sex appeal, and we all feel the pressure of that. And let’s also affirm that God loves us as we are. “You cannot make God stop loving you, because [God’s] love is based on who [God] is, not what you do.”⁶ We don’t need to achieve some status to “earn” God’s love. I remember a Grammy-nominated song by singer Ray Stevens “Everything is Beautiful.” The lyrics declared

Everything is beautiful in its own way,
like a starry summer night on a snow covered winter's day
And everybody's beautiful in their own way....⁷

God loves us as we are... and yet we certainly can see how God would want us to take care of the gift of our bodies which God gave us.

Recovering from the strain of 827 baptism, Pastor Rick Warren pondered that thought: Since our bodies are God’s creation, and since God gave us bodies to use for God’s purposes in the world, and since

² Rick Warren, et. al., The Daniel Plan: 40 Days to a Healthier Life. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013, p. 19

³ Genesis 1:26 Good News translation

⁴ John 20:21-22 Good News translation

⁵ 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 Good News translation

⁶ Rick Warren, *op. cit.*, p. 56

⁷ <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/raystevens/everythingisbeautiful.html>, accessed 5/11/2017

we believe that God dwells with us right here in our bodies, then how can we take better care of the bodies God gave us?

Pastor Warren is pretty well-connected. He was able to call some nationally-renowned physicians and health experts, and together they developed this approach to achieving a healthier life. They called it The Daniel Plan because of a story in very first chapter of the Old Testament book called Daniel.

As you heard, in a nutshell, the Babylonians conquered the people of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. They pillaged the Jewish Temple then destroyed it. The educated, skilled elite Israelites were captured and hauled off to Babylon (modern-day Iraq). The Babylonian king wanted to add to his royal court from the best and brightest of the Israelite exiles. Daniel and some others were selected for this three-year training, and were told that they would dine on the royal court's rich food and wine. Daniel didn't want to defile himself with food and drink prohibited by Jewish dietary laws. So Daniel convinced a sympathetic guard to allow him and his three closest friends to eat just vegetables and water for ten days. "Then," [Daniel said,] "compare us with the young men who are eating the food of the royal court and [make] your decision [on whether we're healthy enough based] on how we look."⁸ "When then time was up, they looked healthier than all those who had been eating the royal food."⁹

What can we learn from the story of Daniel? First of all, The Daniel Plan is not about eating only vegetables and water! Whether or not you're deliberately following the guidance of The Daniel Plan, you still are called to assess how well you're doing as a steward of the gift God has entrusted to you – the gift of:

- a body capable of sustaining loving, supportive relationships;
- a body capable of making the world a better place for all;
- a body capable of acknowledging and thanking its creator and source of life.

There's a familiar passage in the Old Testament book of Joshua. He and the people of Israel are at a figurative crossroads. They have to make a decision about how they're going to proceed. Joshua reminds the people of all that God has done for them and all that the future promises *if* they remain dedicated to God's way. Joshua then challenges them to decide who they will choose to serve: the ways of the past that haven't worked, or the way ahead with God – the way filled with hope and opportunity and an assurance of God's constant compassionate presence in easy times and hard times. Joshua then declares to the people, "As for my family and me, we will serve the Lord."¹⁰

Most of us enjoy privilege of choosing our lifestyle. We're able to choose where we will live and who we will live with. We're able to choose our work, our leisure, our level of activity. To a large degree we're able to decide what we do with money we earn. And to a large degree we are able to choose what we put into these bodies.

Now let me tell you one of the thoughts that's been on your mind for the past fifteen minutes: Mother's Day brunch. Whether you're heading home for a family dinner or going out to a restaurant for a treat, you may be anticipating buttery waffles and steaming maple syrup, or eggs Benedict and roast beef, or a plate of mouth-watering pasta, maybe a buffet of delightful desserts. And you're thinking, "Nice timing, Jon. Way to make me feel guilty about one of my favorite days of the year." That's not my intent, and that's not the point. For one thing, The Daniel Plan is about the joy of abundant good food, not the despair of feeling deprived of food. And for another, The Daniel Plan doesn't expect unbending, absolute perfection in following the plan; it urges you to make thoughtful, intentional choices so you're progressing in the way you want to go.

So, whether or not you're engaged with The Daniel Plan, you have a choice. You can choose to neglect and even abuse the body God has given you. Or you can choose to appreciate and respect and protect your body which is God's creation, God's gift. For God wants to use you to bring the fruit of God's compassionate love to the world.

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⁸ Daniel 1:1-16, esp. v. 12-13 (Today's English Version)

⁹ Daniel 1:15 (Today's English Version)

¹⁰ Joshua 24:14-15 Good News translation