

Let's Talk About It; Putting Away Stigmas in the Church

Text: 1 Timothy 4:1-10

Topic: Physical Fitness

Big Idea: Our hope is not in the performance of our perishing earthly bodies, but in an eternal life.

Application Point: God uses every person—regardless of shape or size—for his glory.

Talking Points:

1. Since God cares about our mental health, it is logical and true that he also cares about our physical health and wellness. As Paul writes to Timothy, this truth is reinforced but not elevated above our pursuit of Jesus. Paul warns Timothy that he should be on alert for those teaching falsehoods—for example, that we shouldn't marry or that we have to avoid certain foods (1 Timothy 4:1–3). God's creations are good and can be received with gratitude (vv. 4–5). If we understand that people are valued beyond the externals of behavior and appearance, then we will rightly serve God and others (v. 6). We are called to ignore ridiculous myths and focus the things that honor God (v. 7). Exercising your body has some value, but it is more important to be devoted to working out your spiritual muscles in pursuit of Jesus (v. 8). Our hope is not in the performance of our perishing earthly bodies, but in an eternal life. Our hope is “set on the living God” (v. 10). We have a tendency to abandon God's truth for our own agendas.
2. We spend a lot of money on fitness and well-being—\$828 billion globally in 2018. Being mindful of our physical wellness is important. The Mayo Clinic suggests that being active improves our mental health and energy level, helps us sleep better, and guard against disease. But have we taken something good and made it an idol? Have we elevated the outward appearance of fitness and health above the inner conditioning of our hearts? Have we given up the actual gospel and replaced it with the health and wealth gospel? Health should never be anything other than a secondary good. Exercise and healthy eating is a noble goal, but it will not **guarantee** a more fruitful ministry. When good health rules our lives it is easy to stumble into the mindset of a new measuring tape for godliness and spirituality: the strictness of your diet, the size of your jeans, the rigor of your workout, the amount of energy you possess. True and complete health comes when we are restored to the Healer, whom we cannot know apart from our bodies. Health comes as the overflow of loving God and submitting every realm of our lives to him, including our physical health and well-being, but not ruled by it.
3. How do we take seriously God's instruction to care for our bodies and to show self-control, without shaming people for being a certain size? Do we believe someone's body size is an indicator of how effective they are as a witness for Christ? Overindulgence (not our size) is sinful behavior. A lack of self-control is as well. Eating excessive amounts to fill an emotional void, while not necessarily sinful, is not indicative of a healthy spiritual life. But being overweight can be caused by a whole host of things (plummeting metabolisms, hormone imbalance, thyroid problems, bad genes or even socioeconomic considerations). God sees the heart and cares so much more about my prayer life than my calorie intake. He expects me to love my neighbors, of all shapes and sizes, and he welcomes me at the foot of the cross where there's enough room for all.
4. When did it become okay to heap shame on anyone, for any reason? The gospel is rooted in grace, and even a warranted case of discipline should be done with love and truth. “In the name of seeking purity and holiness, Christians have frequently decided that our bodies deserve scorn or punishment. This is a lie. And this kind of lie weaves its way into well-intentioned talks about our bodies, holiness, and spiritual disciplines. God is not ashamed of you or your body. A body the world calls flawed does not invalidate the wonder and power of our Creator. No one's size, appearance, or ability prohibits that person from serving neighbors with love.
5. When we talk about health and wellness in the church, instead of focusing on weight or appearance, we should be focusing more on how we can use our capable bodies of all sizes to love God and love our neighbors. This mindset was foundational to the creation of the earliest hospitals. Church history reminds us of what we can accomplish in the strength of the Spirit. If we shed the message of fitness and thinness as the pathway to fulfillment and happiness, we might be surprised to see a bigger-picture way to improve the health—physically and spiritually—of ourselves and those around us.