

August Fitness Challenge: Spiritual Fitness

4 of 4

Philippians 3: 12-14

08 28 2011 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Introduction

In 1993, Jack Canfield and Mark Hansen published a collection of 101 inspiring stories. *Chicken Soup for the Soul* reached #1 on the *New York Times*' Bestseller List.

The book inspired countless sequels, including *Chicken Soup for the Soul, a Second Serving . . . and Third . . . and Fourth . . .* and more. There's *Chicken Soup for: the Boy's Soul, the Girl's Soul, the Teenager's Soul, the College Student's Soul, the Mother's Soul, the Father's Soul, the Dog Lover's Soul, the Cat Lover's Soul, the Baseball Fan's Soul, the Scrapbooking Soul*, and the list goes on and on and on.

For all I know, there's a *Chicken Soup for the Vegetarian's Soul*. And even *Chicken Soup for the Chicken's Soul*. Then again, maybe not!

I. Spiritual Fitness

Today we are concluding our back-to-school worship series entitled **August Fitness Challenge**. During this month, we have examined three aspects of Christian discipleship, including:

- Mental Fitness
- Relational Fitness
- Physical Fitness

This morning we are exploring **spiritual fitness**. How do we care for our souls? In last week's sermon, I outlined God's guidelines for physical fitness that include diet, exercise, and rest/recreation. In the same way, God has also designed exercises or disciplines that lead to spiritual fitness. Our goal is no flabby souls!

John Wesley began the Methodist movement in the 1700s. He emphasized God's **means of grace** that enable us to grow in faith. These spiritual practices are channels through which divine grace flows into our lives.

Wesley believed "*that God has ordained certain ways in which human beings can reliably receive God's grace. People who are seeking salvation may find it in a variety of ways. But the best way to experience God's mercy, forgiveness, and love is to use the normal ways God has established.*" (The Extreme Center, Scott Jones, pp.242-3)

Wesley divided God's means of grace into two broad categories:

✓ **Works of Piety**

✓ **Works of Mercy**

These spiritual fitness exercises are familiar and foundational to us. In fact, you have heard me preach on these things many times. I feel like the older preacher who described his preaching style in this way: "*First, I tell them what I'm going to tell them.*"

Second, I tell the. Third, I tell them what I told them!" It CAN get rather repetitiously redundant!

In 2 Peter 1: 12-13, the author wrote: *"So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory."* So today we are reviewing the fundamentals of spiritual fitness.

II. Works of Piety

God's means of grace first include **works of piety**. These spiritual disciplines are devotional habits that draw us closer to God and make us spiritually fit. They include: **prayer, Bible study, Holy Communion, fasting, and Christian community.**

A. Prayer

When we become Christians, our relationship with the Lord must be nurtured. We are invited to spend time in God's presence. Communication is the key to any relationship.

The primary way we do this is **prayer**. Communication with God. Requires no special language. Do not have to use "Thee, Thou, and Thy." Don't have to conjugate Elizabethan English. Talk and listen.

I've heard and given sermons, Sunday School lessons, and Bible studies on prayer. But the only way to learn to pray is to **pray!** We learn to pray like a child learning to talk. Sometimes just babble but learn in the process. Slowly learn the language and art of prayer. Effective prayer embraces two disciplines: daily prayer and constant prayer.

- 1) Pray **daily at specific times**. Set aside a time for prayer. May well be kneeling in home or church. But can also be in car, bed, exercise, etc.
- 2) Pray **constantly and all the time**. (What is the best thing to say to your boss when he catches you napping at work? Just say "Amen" before opening your eyes!") The apostle Paul told the church: *"Pray without ceasing."* (1 Thes. 5: 17) Pray: in season and out of season, feel like it and when don't, special times and all the time. Pray.
- 3) One pattern of prayer is the acronym ACTS: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. Of course, Jesus gave us another pattern for prayer: The Lord's Prayer.

B. Bible Study

The second means of maintaining a vital relationship with God is through **Bible Study**. The Lord has already provided us an instruction manual for life. The Scriptures reveal the Lord's will for our lives. But we often ignore God's Word.

Everyone knows that men don't need instruction books. We are instinctively born with the knowledge of how to put together toys, appliances, machines, and cars. Give us a hammer, duct tape, and WD 40, and we can put together anything. Real men's motto is: *"If all else fails, read the directions!"*

Sometimes we take the same approach to Christian discipleship. Yet what we need to know has already been provided in Scripture. We are not going to *grow* in faith unless these the disciplines of prayer and Bible study are an important part of our lives.

Daily routine that becomes a lifetime habit.

Individual and Group

Practical advice: Get a Bible you can read and understand. I prefer the *NIV*.

Begin: Mark
 Luke/Acts
 Psalms

C. Holy Communion

Wesley always included Holy Communion as a key element in works of piety. We gather at the Lord's Table and experience communion with God and community with others. Something sacred and holy occurs when we partake of the bread and cup. Christ's Spirit gives us sustenance and nurture for our spiritual journey. This is one of the reasons we began having monthly Communion at the 8:30 service so people would have an opportunity to receive the sacrament on a more regular basis.

D. Fasting

Fasting means to go without food and sometimes drink. There are different types of fasts. Meal. Day of meals. Particular type of food or drink. Abstain from some other activities for a time. Example: Give something up for Lent.

Three goals: practice self-discipline, recall Christ's sacrifice for us, and focus our attention upon God. Last week we talked about how we are a psychosomatic people of body and soul. What affects the one, affects the other. Fasting is one means of making our body our servant rather than our master.

E. Christian Community

Individual/Friends

Small group. Essential. Jesus and the 12 disciples.

Worship

Places to encourage one another—and hold one another accountable.

III. Works of Mercy

God's means of grace involve works of piety that help us to grow in personal devotion. However, works of piety are incomplete without **works of mercy**. Piety leads to practice. James said that faith without works is dead. We are called to be in ministry to others. Christian discipleship is both an inward and outward reality. Our personal devotion leads to service of others. Our service to others leads to personal devotion. This becomes a self-reinforcing cycle. Works of mercy include:

A. Do Good

This is so simple that we sometimes miss it. Christians act to do good in the world around us. Wesley once said: "*Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all*

the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as you can.”

B. Visit the Sick and Imprisoned

We don't have to look far for opportunities to be in ministry to those who are sick and institutionalized. I know good Christians who balk at this type of service. They protest: "I don't like to visit hospitals. I cannot stand the smells in a nursing home. Going to funerals makes me sad. I would be nervous visiting a prison."

Allow me to give you some helpful, pastoral advice: "GET OVER IT!" This is not about YOU but the person you are visiting. Jesus said that we would be known by our love for others. BUT when we make our service other-centered and visit those who are hurting, it DOES become about us. Because we grow in God's grace.

C. Feed and Clothe the Needy

Social service has always been at the heart of Christian service. Acts describes the Jerusalem church caring for the poor, feeding the hungry, and providing for widows and orphans. John Wesley once said that the reason most church people have no feelings for the poor is that we insulate ourselves from any contact with them.

James 2:14-17 puts it in a humorous way that's really not funny:

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

D. Earn, Save, and Give

Wesley strongly emphasized Christian stewardship. His most familiar advice in this area is: "*Make all you can, save all you can, give all you can.*" Christian stewards are given financial resources as a trust from God. We are blessed so that we can be a blessing to others. There is nothing wrong with making and saving—but financial income and management are means to an end SO THAT WE CAN GIVE.

E. Seek Justice

People of faith are also called to seek justice. The prophetic call of the Old and New Testament challenge the status quo of the same old, same old. Amos 5: 24 thunders: "*But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!*" God's kingdom turns our world upside down so that it can become right side up.

In a world that picks sides, Christians are called to be on the side of the least, last, and lost. We stand with boldness before the world's oppression and injustice to declare: "*Thus saith the Lord!*"

Conclusion

In the span of a few minutes, I have rattled off ten different works of piety and mercy. The word “**works**” calls to mind human diligence and labor. And certainly we must play our part in responding to God’s call upon our lives.

Yet I would also remind you that all of these activities are means of God’s **GRACE**. Grace is the first and last word of the gospel. Grace is a gift freely given to us even when we don’t deserve it. Ultimately, we grow in faith because of God’s grace in our lives. Whatever attempts we make to exercise spiritual disciplines are enabled and enhanced by the Spirit’s presence.

Phil 4: 12: “*Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.*”

If you want to be spiritually fit, then open your heart to God’s presence. Embrace and practice the means of grace, including works of piety and works of mercy. You will discover that these spiritual disciplines are the real *Chicken Soup for the Christian Soul*.

Guided Prayer

Consider today the means of grace we have discussed. Which one especially touched your heart, mind, and soul as a place where you need to grow? Which one of these spiritual disciplines do you wish you had begun five years ago? I encourage you to commit to at least one of these devotional exercises in order to become spiritually fit.

Works of Piety: Prayer, Bible study, Communion, fasting, fellowship
Works of Mercy: Do good, visit the sick and institutionalized, care for the needy, earn/give/save, and seek justice.

You cannot go back in time and start these disciplines five years ago. But which ones will you wish you had started today five years from now? Today is the day, now is the time. Dedicate yourself anew to God to become spiritually fit.