

Real Faith for Real People:
“Am I In Shape Spiritually?”

1 Timothy 4:7-12

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September 2, 2007

Consult any physician, ask any health guru, read any article in a newspaper or magazine, and all will agree - the best thing we can do for our physical health is exercise. We may not be able to run a marathon or lift weights like a football lineman, but it will do us a world of good to simply take a walk.

Here in his letter to his young friend Timothy, Paul, too, notes the value of physical exercise, then quickly instructs Timothy to get in shape spiritually as well. *“Train yourself in godliness, for while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.”* That is what I want us to think about today. Spiritual exercises, ways to stay in shape spiritually. John Wesley called them “means of grace.”

SOME SPIRITUAL EXERCISES ARE PRIMARILY PRIVATE.

Bible reading is a means of grace.

Some of you have read through the entire Bible over the past year. Congratulations! One person told me these readings changed her life. Several of you have decided to do it again.

The Word of God is a lamp to our feet and a light for our path. John Wesley said, “I want to know one thing, the way to heaven. God wrote the way down in a Book. O, give me that Book, at any price, give me that Book.” The Bible is a means of grace.

Prayer is a means of grace.

Prayer is communion with God and concern for others. In prayer we lift up our hearts to God and hear the cry of the needy.

In defiance to the agnostics who want to define God as an imaginary father figure and prayer is nothing more than wishful thinking, I stand before you today as a direct product of people's prayers. The finest, most loving, most caring thing we can possibly say to another is, "I'm praying for you." Let us pray without ceasing. Let us pray with every remembrance. Let us pray intentionally and relentlessly.

Let us be careful. Some of the raunchiest rumors and fiercest lies find their beginnings in prayer meetings. When this happens, the devil is delighted, people are injured, and damage is done to the kingdom of God. Pray, but do not gossip. Make prayer a means of grace.

Fasting, said Wesley, is a means of grace.

Most of us fast to lose weight. Wesley advised fasting as a means of grace. For most of his life, Wesley observed Friday as a day of fasting. Fasting for Wesley became a way to turn his body toward God. Moses fasted on the mountain. Elijah fasted in a cave. Jesus fasted in the desert. The early Church fasted before making decisions.

Fasting is a form of penance, a way of being sorry for our sins. Fasting is an act of freedom from addictions that control us. Fasting provides a time for prayer and thoughts of the poor.

SOME SPIRITUAL EXERCISES ARE PRIMARILY PUBLIC.

Among them are Holy Communion, Christian Conferencing and public worship.

Holy Communion is a means of grace.

Wesley said in a sermon, "Let everyone who has either any desire to please God, or any love for his own soul, obey God... by receiving communion every time he can."

“Do this in remembrance of me,” said Jesus.

Lest I forget Gethsemane,

Lest I forget Christ’s agony,

Lest I forget God’s love for me,

Lead me to Holy Communion. Holy Communion jogs our memory.

Holy Communion celebrates Christ’s presence. “Pour out your Holy Spirit on these gifts of bread and wine, and make them be for us the body and blood of Christ.”

Christ is in you - saving, sanctifying, loving, lifting, helping, and healing. How could this metaphor of Christ’s presence be acted out in a more concrete way than Holy Communion? It is bread making its way through your digestive system and wine finding its way through your blood stream, giving us help for today and a brighter hope for tomorrow.

Holy Communion conveys God’s great hope for tomorrow. “By your Spirit make us one with Christ, and one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at his heavenly banquet.”

Take their threats of Armageddon. Read their books on being left behind. Let me feast at God’s heavenly banquet where tears are wiped away, sorrow is ended and death will be no more.

Christian Conferencing, said Wesley, is a means of grace.

Now, if there was ever a word that we Methodists have abused, it is the word Conferencing. Conferencing for modern-day Methodists consists of elections, legislation, self-congratulations. Conferences in Wesley’s day were composed of soul searching prayer, mutual accountability, and Christian fellowship.

Every year Annual Conferences gives out a Harry Denman Evangelism Award. I

have one hanging in my office, as do thousands of others. One year the Kentucky lay recipient of the Denman award was a Sunday school teacher from a little church in rural Kentucky. The young woman stepped to the microphone, visibly shaking from head to toe, confessing that she had never seen that many people in a room before. Then she said something I will never forget. She said, "I didn't know you were supposed to get an award for leading boys and girls to Jesus. I thought that's what you were supposed to do. I didn't need any award for it. Jesus is my reward."

Public worship is a means of grace.

I sit on my deck once in a while and watch the airplanes land at the Nashville Airport. From my deck it seems like airplanes are everywhere. But if you want to board one, it is a pretty good idea to get to an airport. Likewise, God is everywhere - in the air we breathe, in the stars we see on moonlit nights, in the depths of our very being. But the fact remains, if you want to meet God, get acquainted with him, express your love for him, find the will of God, you probably need to show up at worship.

Even on holiday weekends, I kind of feel sorry for the folks who choose lake water over baptismal water, golf over God, entertainment over inspiration, the pleasure of a moment over the joy of eternity.

I am not trying to be judgmental. I am just concerned that some of us are going to meet the Lord one of these days, and he will not recognize us because we have so seldom seen each other here below.

Are you in shape spiritually? Is it well with your soul?