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*Every Body Matters*

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## SOULS OF SILVER

“I live in a crucible between impressive success and miserable failure when it comes to personal discipline.”

Mark Rhode’s story is one that just about any person can relate to.

“I struggle constantly with my weight. I have a really hard time fighting against the self-defeating behavior that makes me gravitate toward sweets or fast foods. In no way do I feel like I have conquered or mastered the ability to lift up my body to what it could be. I certainly weigh more than I should—and more than I want to.”

Mark is in his early fifties. He’s a senior director at World Vision International; before that, he made his living working in advertising. On his last business trip, he ate twenty-four restaurant meals in a row. Like many of us, he’s concerned about his health habits, and like many, he lives with a constant sense of failure that

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he could be doing more about his weight. He could be doing it better, could be more disciplined.

Whether you're in your twenties, thirties, or forties—or facing your fifties, sixties, seventies, or beyond—one thing is certain: you're doing it in a body, a body that not only contains a soul but *affects* your soul as well. We are not angels, pursuing God without physical covering, and if we try to pretend that we are—living as though the state of our bodies has no effect on the condition of our souls—all the proper doctrine in the world can't save us from eating away our sensitivity to God's presence or throwing away years of potential ministry if we wreck our heart's physical home.

That's the spirit out of which Mark Rhode lives. He wants to pursue God, to serve God, to know God, but he lives in a body that often seems at war with his soul.

In this, he is typical.

This book is for those Christians who, like me and Mark, recognize we might have grown a bit soft—in our bodies and in our souls. In the deepest parts of our understanding, we suspect there may even be a connection, but the application is so unpleasant that we often ignore this soft-spoken truth. For most of our lives, we have emphasized growing our souls, not always realizing that a lack of physical discipline can undercut and even erode spiritual growth.

Since focusing on the spiritual is our “default” line of thinking, let's take a few moments to look at what a healthy soul is, and then, in that context, we'll see

how difficult it is to cultivate such a soul while largely ignoring our bodies.

## Refined Souls

People often speak of wanting “hearts of gold,” an apt and vibrant metaphor, but I suggest an additional one. Let’s start speaking of “souls of silver.” Silver souls speak of a divine touch, souls that have been refined, purified, and made beautiful through a difficult, sometimes brutal, refining process.

Silver is harder than gold and has the added benefit of possessing the highest thermal conductivity of any metal. Because silver is a little harder than gold, once it is pounded, it tends to hold its shape better (though such shaping takes that much more force). If our aim is to “conduct” God’s presence—not to impress people on our own, but rather to be available to help connect others to God—I can’t imagine a more apt “metal metaphor” to choose.

The Bible celebrates the silver-making process as a metaphor of personal refinement. Scripture assumes that we aren’t what we need to be—our souls are polluted, weighted down by dross—and goes on to describe how God will treat our souls as a silversmith treats raw precious metals:

For you, God, tested us;  
you refined us like silver.

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You brought us into prison  
and laid burdens on our backs.  
You let people ride over our heads;  
*we went through fire and water,*  
but you brought us to a place of abundance.

Psalm 66:10–12, emphasis added

This speaks of a fierce but beautiful refining process that leads “to a place of abundance.” To get us there, the silversmith doesn’t just speak comfort and ease to his silver. He doesn’t massage it into shape. No. He puts it through the fire. He even beats it and hammers it until it becomes what he has designed it to be.

The Bible declares that this is exactly what God does for his people. Consider Zechariah 13:9: “This third I will put into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold.” Or Malachi 3:3: “He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver.”

The refinement process is as fierce as it is necessary. The goal is to be purified and refined for God’s service, just like silver:

In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for special purposes and some for common use. Those who cleanse themselves from the latter *will be instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.*

2 Timothy 2:20–21, emphasis added

The reason I want to get in shape then, the reason I long for God's church to get in shape, is not to impress anyone, not to make others feel inferior, not to demonstrate our own personal discipline and self-control. God forbid! On the contrary, it is to become, as Paul writes, "instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work."

Read these words again, slowly, because this teaching about the connection between physical and spiritual fitness requires that our motivation be as pure as we can make it in this fallen world. We are called to be all of the following:

- instruments for special purposes
- made holy
- useful to the Master
- prepared to do any good work

Desiring a silver soul means that we stop treating our bodies like ornaments—with all the misguided motivations often displayed by those who build their bodies out of pride and ambition—and start treating our bodies like *instruments*, vessels set apart to serve the God who fashioned them. Whether we have strong or weak bodies, healthy or sick, overnourished or undernourished, how do we begin moving from where we are now to more purposefully building bodies that function like instruments?

### Dross

An athletic club I once went to displayed two chunks of silicone on top of the reception desk—one weighed five pounds, the other ten. It was a vivid way of telling us, “This is the extra weight you’re carrying. Pick it up and feel its effects.”

Just as our bodies can be weighted down with extra baggage, so our souls are encrusted with dross. To make silver, the silversmith has to remove the dross that clings to it. Dross is the waste or other chemical element that surrounds silver; it has to be removed in order for the silver to be refined. You don’t *create* silver; you *separate* the silver through a refining process. It is an image of taking something lesser away from something greater.

Biblical writers loved using this image. Every age has its own “dross,” elements that keep us from shining brightly, elements that make us less than useful, and less than prepared to do any good work. Thousands of years ago, Isaiah warned, “Your silver has become dross” (1:22).

Ezekiel prophesied, “Son of man, the people of Israel have become dross to me; all of them are the copper, tin, iron and lead left inside a furnace. They are but the dross of silver” (22:18).

The writer of wisdom explained what must take place: “Remove the dross from the silver, and a silversmith can produce a vessel” (Proverbs 25:4).

God has to remove less-precious metals from our



souls—tin, copper, lead—in order to let the silver shine in all its glory. He has to separate us from lesser things that tarnish us and keep us from conducting his presence, like using our pantry as a prayer closet. Like turning to ice cream for comfort instead of to him. Like making love to Double Stuf Oreos instead of having the difficult conversation we need to have with a loved one. Like pretending we don't have time to take care of the one body God has given us when, in reality, we're just growing soft.

This refining process will at times feel fierce and burdensome. If people aren't warned about the refining process, and its subsequent conviction, they'll either reject it as an attack from Satan or resent it as an attack from God.

We need the same attitude toward our dross as God has—a passionate desire *to get rid of it*. Consider Paul's attitude in his first letter to the Corinthians:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

1 Corinthians 9:24–27

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Sisters and brothers, do we think God inspired Paul to write this just so that we could admire Paul and lift him up as a high, unattainable ideal properly ignored by all but the unusually holy, or so *each believer* would be inspired to adopt Paul's attitude for himself or herself?

Paul was so zealous to be made holy, useful to his master, and prepared to do any good work that he was willing to "strike a blow" to his body and make it his slave toward that end. On the surface, this does not appear to be a comforting word; we may prefer that God would say, "Don't worry. It's not necessary for you to pursue holiness. It doesn't matter if you make yourself useful or prepared to do any good work. I love you just the way you are. You *can* run aimlessly, or even not run at all; it really doesn't matter to me. I'll still love you, and you'll still be fine."

We have a total misunderstanding of grace if we think grace makes us less serious about holiness. Consider these words from Paul's letter to Titus:

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Titus 2:11–13

If grace means we give up and keep on giving in to unhealthy patterns of living because it's too hard

and we've failed too many times, if grace means we simply rest in God's love and don't really care whether our bodies or souls honor God, why does Paul tell the Thessalonians to "live lives worthy of God" (1 Thessalonians 2:12)? Why does he ask God to fill the Colossians with knowledge of God's will "so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work" (1:10)? To the Ephesians, he wrote, "I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received" (4:1). To the Philippians, "Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (1:27).

Paul wanted people to know their unconditional acceptance in Christ. But Paul also urges us to live up to the high calling of those who bear Christ's name—suggesting that effort is a fruit of grace, not its enemy (1 Corinthians 9:27; Philippians 2:12–13; 2 Peter 1:5). Being called into God's service is a glorious invitation that should captivate us and make us eager to participate. Dr. Ed Young mirrors Paul's balanced approach: "Contrary to what much of the world assumes, good works won't save anybody. But contrary to what many Christians seem to believe, good works are a primary reason why we are saved."<sup>1</sup>

Remember, Paul urged the young Timothy to "pursue" righteousness and godliness (1 Timothy 6:11). When you tell someone to pursue something, you're calling them to engage in an active journey. It assumes that without such a pursuit, you'll never get there. The true Christian life is a life in which holiness is a serious

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pursuit and a believer earnestly makes himself or herself “useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.”

For me, physical discipline is primarily about motivation. Most of us know what to do to become healthier and to be better stewards of our bodies. There are a few helpful tips we can learn, but in general, we know we need to eat less and exercise more. Furthermore, most of us generally want to be healthier. But our motivation lags.

Just as viewing my marriage through the lens of a pathway toward holiness more than happiness gave me renewed motivation to grow in union with my wife and ongoing motivation to keep pursuing deeper intimacy with her, so understanding my body as an instrument of service to God is giving me renewed motivation to take better care of it in the face of my cravings and laziness.

If we lose the image of running the race, or our zeal to do good works, we lose the motivation to be refined, to be made holy, to be prepared to do these good works. We won’t be as ruthless as Paul, who said he would strike a blow to his body, if need be, to compete with all his might.

Christians who don’t take their health seriously don’t take their mission seriously. What we’re saying by our actions is, “My life doesn’t really matter.” But because of the ability of God to work powerfully in any repentant sinner’s life, every body *does* matter.

## Tarnished

Two areas of dross that received attention in previous ages are widely ignored today: excessive eating (in all its forms) and laziness when it comes to caring for our bodies. In ancient times, these hurdles were called *gluttony* and *sloth*.

Growing up, I rarely heard any teachers talk about either of them or about how a lack of physical fitness can become a significant spiritual issue, so I never considered how giving in to them might be holding me back. It wasn't until I spotted them in the classics that I could see them in Scripture, and then it took a decade of God's gentle confrontation pointing out how my failures in both areas were negatively impacting my spirit. They weren't "damning" me, but they *were* making me less useful and less prepared to do any good work.

The last thing this book is about is obtaining some "holy" body shape. It is about having a silver *soul*, not about fitting into a certain size of jeans. Many people address physical fitness for lesser reasons—to live longer (even though their lives may lack purpose and passion), to look younger (even though they are aging by the day), to look more appealing (even though by God's providence their bodies deteriorate), to enjoy physical health (even though physically fit people die of cancer and even heart disease all the time). These are the motivations the world clings to, and while they may have some merit, there is little of lasting value in them.

The apostle Paul presents a far superior motivation

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for making a serious effort to grow: to become “instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.”

This was Paul’s prayer for Timothy, and it is God’s desire for us. To me, it does not sound like a heavy obligation or burdensome command; it sounds like the most wonderful life I can imagine.

It is liberation! Overeating and overindulgence lead to deprivation. Being out of shape by choice is a counterfeit form of existence. Being a better steward of your body is truly a blessing and a precious, if not literally delicious, way to live.

### The Battle of the Bike

I mentioned earlier that Mark Rhode is typical in his struggle with overeating. Where he is *not* typical has to do with his passion for ultra distance events in cycling. “Ultra distance” is a polite way of saying *absolutely insane*. As I write these words, the race Mark is training for goes from Seattle to Spokane. If you’ve ever lived on the West Coast, you know that the most direct way to get from Seattle to Spokane is to go over the Cascade Mountains. These are not “mountains” like East Coasters call the Blue Ridge Mountains “mountains.” These are mountains that make you wish you had oxygen at the top.

The race is, in fact, 284 miles long. (That’s just slightly shorter than the distance between Boston and

Philadelphia but considerably longer than the journey from Washington, D.C., to New York City.)

It climbs 12,000 feet of altitude.

And the goal is to do this in a *single* day.

The fact that only thirty racers sign up assures me that there are still many sane people on this planet.

But Mark's discipline on the bike hasn't cured his propensity toward overeating or eating the wrong kinds of food, and that concerns him. It also concerns him that this is a battle he rarely hears addressed from the pulpit. He says, "We've been taught in the evangelical tradition about adultery and lying and stealing and coveting; about lust and alcoholism and smoking and drug abuse. But many evangelical pastors who preach against these things are visibly overweight or obese. I don't say this to judge them—I struggle with the same thing. But sometimes I wonder. Sure, they may have conquered the online porn, but it seems like they're 'medicating' with food; I get that, because I do the same thing."

It is this battle that has led Mark toward the ultra distance events on his bike. "For me, getting into these events is like attacking my demons head on. I choose it as a way to fight back against where I know I'm weak."

At six foot five, Mark can hide a little extra weight better than most; and since he rides often and far, he's able to get away with consuming a few extra calories now and then. But for him, the issue isn't how he looks in the mirror; it's a spiritual one. Second Corinthians 12:9 drives Mark's life and approach toward food and

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personal discipline: “My power is made perfect in weakness.”

“This defines the whole theological underpinning for why I do endurance events. I am weak; I am broken; my sins are a lack of discipline and gluttony, among others. And riding my bike is a physical way to address what I lack, and God provides through his power.”

Mark has received and lives in God’s grace, but, like me, he has found that true grace doesn’t kill effort; it motivates and empowers effort. And in Mark’s mind, this ongoing battle—one that will never be completely won—is a good battle, a soul-forming battle, a battle worth fighting. The sobering truth is that none of us will be completely free of these struggles this side of heaven, but staying engaged in the battle will do tremendous things for our souls as well as for our physical health.

Is there any way that, like Mark, we can begin to address some neglected issues and more actively participate in God’s refining process in our souls and thereby become more useful to the Master and better prepared to do more good works? Can challenges lived out in our bodies point out our need to tend more earnestly to our souls?

Our motivation isn’t being accepted by God or cultivating his favor. Christ has already taken care of that. It’s about wanting to run the race with intense focus, purpose, and passion.

I am not as skilled a writer as I wish I could be; for your sake, I would wish for more—more insight and



clarity, and perhaps a little more wit. But if I am successful at all in this endeavor, this teaching won't be burdensome but *liberating*. What God asks us to give up are the very things that Scripture and the Christian classics testify make war against us—things that not only make us miserable but also keep us from more profound and deeper joys than we could ever have imagined—a place of “true abundance.”

## HEADS WITHOUT BODIES

An old, popular ditty goes like this: “First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in a baby carriage!” Many women will tell you that along with the baby carriage comes fifteen pounds that might take you fifteen years to lose.

Karen Yates faced the challenge of postpartum weight gain following the births of her first two children, but what really got her attention was that she also gained weight following the arrival of their third child—who came into their home via adoption.

One of the selling points for adoption is that a mom doesn’t have to gain weight to get a new child, but this wasn’t Karen’s experience.

“It was a tough time for me spiritually, and the adoption process wasn’t easy, so there was a lot of stress, which caused me to eat more.”

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After Karen and her husband, Curtis, finally got little Daniel from Ethiopia, Karen had to deal with the shock of caring for three young children.

“My world felt very small. I felt trapped in my own house. I took care of everyone but felt invisible. I knew I was loved, but as a young mother you pour everything into your very needy young children. I wasn’t taking care of myself.”

Not only was she not losing the earlier “baby weight”; she was actually adding a bit more, which made her feel even worse about herself.

Karen’s spiritual diet wasn’t much healthier. “You could describe it the way they describe an eating disorder—binge and purge. One week I’d be in the Word and pray a lot, determined to get on track with God and put him first. I got up at 5:30 a.m., even if I had been up several times during the night taking care of fussy babies. But then, inevitably, somebody got the flu, chaos would ensue, and the quiet times stopped for a week.”

After months of this physical and spiritual seesaw, Karen looked in the mirror and “didn’t think I looked very attractive, didn’t feel noticed, didn’t feel very beautiful with Curtis. I was no longer his girlfriend; I was his frumpy wife and the mother of his kids. It’s not that *he* made me feel that way; I felt it all on my own.” The worse she felt, the worse she’d do with her devotions, the less initiating she’d be toward her husband, and the less energetic she became with her kids.

The element that brought Karen out of this stupor

may surprise some believers—but I won't spoil the surprise just yet. Let's look instead at why Karen's solution often isn't even considered by pastors and counselors.

### **Living from the Chin Up**

God gave us souls—and bodies to go with them. To be fully alive, fully human, fully the people God created us to be, we have to care for our bodies, discipline them, and make them our servants in our service to God.

As I've already stated, we must guard against viewing the pursuit of God as a soul- or mind-based search in which our bodies are irrelevant at best or our enemies at worst. Though there is a long-established tradition in Christianity touting the benefits of responsible eating, there is also a tradition of those who, as one historian put it, live “from the chin up.” The only part of the body they attend to is the intellect (doctrine); anything else is considered a lesser pursuit. But living from the chin up ignores the impact of our bodies on our souls.

Elton Trueblood writes the following:

Angels . . . are pure spirits without bodily needs, but men are not pure spirits. Men are combinations of body and mind and spirit, uniting in a working partnership both hand and brain. They thus have a variety of temptations and any valid religion will be frankly concerned with all of these.<sup>1</sup>

Swimming laps or doing Pilates won't substitute for regular study, prayer, and spiritual devotions, but

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taking off the shackles of laziness, overeating, and the physical debilitation brought about by ignoring our physical fitness can set our souls on a course of pursuing God with a renewed vigor, earnestness, and delight.

*Christianity Today* columnist Carolyn Arends writes of feeling convicted about “spiritualizing” her inclination toward avoiding physical fitness by focusing on “soul things” instead of “body things.” A wake-up call provided by her parents’ bout with ill health led to a significant life change, after which Carolyn concludes the following:

Jesus called us to love God with our hearts, souls, minds, *and* strength. Just as his words disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed, they call the overactive to stillness and activate the overly still. They restore the soul to those who overemphasize the body, and redeem the body for those who focus only on the soul.<sup>2</sup>

If Karen Yates had focused only on her soul, she would have missed her “volleyball therapy.”

### **Volleyball Therapy**

The thing that initially helped lift Karen out of her downward spiral was actually very physical: “I started playing volleyball again.”

At first, she felt rusty and awkward on the court. It was a bit embarrassing, having been a fairly accomplished player earlier in life, to walk into an open gym.

But she made herself do it, and the results proved dramatic.

“I noticed after a few weeks of going to the gym that being away from my kids, playing a team sport with other adults, not thinking about my duties at all, dishes, or grocery shopping—it just brought me joy. It added fun back into my life.”

The volleyball playing acted like rolling a boulder down a hill—it picked up steam for other exercise in her life. Karen noticed a little more energy, a little lighter spirit, so she started going for walks in the morning with the kids. She noticed her body getting stronger and thought to herself, “I can walk a little farther today, a little faster, maybe even trot for a bit.” And then those trots became minijogs and then full-fledged runs.

She started feeling even better about herself, and that gave her the motivation, energy, and initiative to become more disciplined about both what she was eating and what she was feeding her heart spiritually.

This is key. Addressing not necessarily “junk food” but certainly less than healthy food led Karen to reconsider her *spiritual* food—the television programs that weren’t scandalously bad but also weren’t particularly fruitful to be watching.

Because of the increased exercise, Karen also started sleeping better, which meant that she woke up with more energy and her mind was freer to pursue God.

What I love about this is that, as Karen tells her story, it’s clear that mind and spirit, soul and body, began working together. Just as abuse of our bodies

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can gradually numb us to Christ's presence, so caring for our bodies can warm us up to his initiating grace.

The newfound energy and confidence led Karen to address her eating habits. For some well-intentioned but misguided believers, all confidence is considered inappropriate—but this is a misunderstanding of humility and, I believe, a misreading of Scripture. Humility doesn't mean an attitude of defeat; it points to recognition of dependence *and a sure hope* based on the presence of Jesus Christ. It was in large part Karen's burgeoning confidence that led her to feel happier and more energetic as a mom and become more disciplined in her spiritual devotions; it even made her "feel better sexually"—which makes perfect sense if one's body is getting into shape.

Karen warns that when women discuss body issues, they often enable each other by talking down women who are doing something about it, ascribing to them bad motives or painting them as shallow. Instead of gossiping about others, she recommends letting the physical fitness build the confidence necessary to also address other areas of life. "Most women—in fact, most people—want to be attractive to their spouses; they want to be good parents; they want to be their best. But becoming your best takes hard work and discipline. It isn't easy."

It also takes addressing soul *and* body, mind *and* heart. We can err on either end of the spectrum of neglect.

## True Training

In *The Republic*, Plato recounts a scene in which Socrates tutors his student Glaucon: “Have you noticed how a lifelong devotion to exercise, to the exclusion of anything else, produces a certain type of mind? Just as a neglect of it produces another type? One type tends to be tough and uncivilized, the other soft and over-sensitive.”<sup>3</sup>

Socrates himself was a hardy figure, a physically fit former infantry soldier in the Athenian army. He recognized that all exercise and no study creates only half a man, just as all study and no exercise also creates half a man—in this case an effeminate, soft, overly sensitive man who isn’t tough enough to address real life.

It’s biblically appropriate for Christians to emphasize spiritual training in godliness above physical fitness; the Bible itself does this: “For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things” (1 Timothy 4:8). But to say that spiritual fitness is more important isn’t to say that physical fitness doesn’t matter at all, or that it has no impact on godliness and spiritual fitness. Dr. Kenneth Cooper, who popularized the word (and movement) *aerobics* argues, “A healthy, fit body is the most appropriate home for a vibrant spirit.”<sup>4</sup>

Eighteenth-century Anglican writer William Law told us that training our bodies is essential to building lives of holiness:

Since we are neither all soul nor all body, seeing



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none of our actions are either separately of the soul or separately of the body, seeing we have no habits but such as are produced by the actions both of our souls and bodies, it is certain that if we would arrive at habits of devotion or delight in God, we must not only meditate and exercise our souls, but we must practice and exercise our bodies to all such outward actions as are conformable to these inward tempers.<sup>5</sup>

This is entirely in keeping with what the Bible teaches, namely, the intimate connection between body and soul.

### Body and Spirit

The apostle Paul exalts women who long to be holy “in both body and spirit” (1 Corinthians 7:34). We are not souls who can neglect our physical beings. Holiness requires a totality of experience that includes our bodies. Paul urged, “Do not let sin reign in your mortal body” (Romans 6:12). On the contrary, “Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness” (Romans 6:19).

In fact, biblical admonitions to pursue a physical holiness suggest that even our bodies should proclaim Christ’s lordship. Paul tells the Philippians that his goal is that “Christ will be exalted in my body” (Philippians

1:20). This is a prayer he has for *every* believer: “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul *and body* be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:23, emphasis added).

The sins we are to attack are not just soul-based sins — sins of the mind, sins of the heart (lustful thoughts, envy, jealousy, hatred, prejudice), or sins of disbelief — but also bodily sins: “Dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates *body and spirit*, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God” (2 Corinthians 7:1, emphasis added). Paul teaches, “Each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable” (1 Thessalonians 4:4). In fact, Paul’s definitive statement comes to the Corinthians: “Honor God with your bodies” (1 Corinthians 6:20).

The curse of today is that so many Christians equate bodily sins with sexual sins. The only possible bodily sin, in their minds, is related to lust. If they’re not sinning sexually, they believe these verses don’t apply to them. The contemporary age of the church is the only generation that has believed this.

We cannot be faithful believers if we ignore our bodies. Dr. Ed Young insists that caring for our bodies is a way of honoring and loving God. He brings both aspects together when he writes, “We cannot have total heart health if we focus only on the biological heart and ignore the spiritual. But true spirituality means

accepting the stewardship of the physical heart God has given us as well.”<sup>6</sup>

### Silent Sermons

I asked Karen if she had ever been challenged about these issues from the pulpit, if a sermon may have encouraged her to consider pursuing her “volleyball therapy.” She became silent and was reluctant to speak until I pressed her. Finally she commented, “If a large percentage of Americans are overweight, there are a lot of Christians who are overweight too, including church members *and* pastors. I doubt a sermon like that would go over well.”

After pausing, she added, “People want to hear about grace and about how much God loves them, about how they’re good enough just as they are. There’s a lot of truth in that, but the message about weight in our churches is that it’s rude to say to someone that they need to lose weight — so we just don’t address it.”

Sadly this is all too true, even though the failure to address weight issues can keep people imprisoned in unhealthy habits and traveling a downward spiral, the kind Karen had found herself in. Talking to Karen now, sensing the joy, noticing the strength, listening to her insights, makes you wonder why we don’t want more Christians like her filling local churches and why we won’t address these issues in an attitude of grace and encouragement.

Remembering her old self, Karen can recall the

shame—not just with people but with God too. It was the shame, not the confidence, that kept her from being “useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.”

It may sound strange to prescribe volleyball for what seems like spiritual ills, but it’s difficult to argue when you talk to Karen. Here, indeed, is a woman who is having her soul refined. She hasn’t arrived yet—none of us ever will—but she is certainly more useful to her Master and more prepared to do any good work.

And that’s the promise of faithful fitness. Those of us who have the courage to address this personal issue in our own lives will experience considerable results. Improving your physical fitness will increase your overall zest for life. You’ll have more energy for your marriage, for parenting, for your business.

And I also believe that being in shape means you will experience many benefits in your spiritual life. Like Karen, you may even notice improvement in sexual intimacy. Psychologically, the endorphins that follow a hard workout are an excellent way to manage stress and feel better about life in general. And I have had times of worship while exercising that are much richer than any I’ve known sitting in a large room singing choruses that some other writer has written.

### **Will You Consider This?**

As I’ll make even clearer later in the book, I’m not trying to get us to pick elders or deacons by how thin

## EVERY BODY MATTERS

they are. We will soon discuss how there are different body types, and that we are called to steward only the body that God has given us, not to judge others. God alone knows whether we are honoring him with our daily choices. Seeking to maintain a particular body shape merely to please others—even other Christians—is still people pleasing. Our focus should rather be on becoming a community of worshipers who live to please God.

But for your own health and vitality, your own spirituality, your own family, and your own personal satisfaction—will you consider this? Not as a diet. Not as a fad. But as a life change, birthed as a spiritual exercise, a part of your worship, a new way of surrendering to God's presence in your life.

If I sound enthusiastic, I am. My son and I talk about this a lot, and I pointed out to him once how, though exercise and staying in shape require a lot of work and even regular pain, *not* being in shape requires its own pains and labors. If I'm going to hurt in this fallen world—and everyone of us will—I'd rather hurt and be sore getting in shape than hurt and be sore because my body isn't fit.

By God's design, we are a people with souls who desperately yearn for intimacy with God—people whose souls reside in bodies that can hinder or help this pursuit. Which will it be?