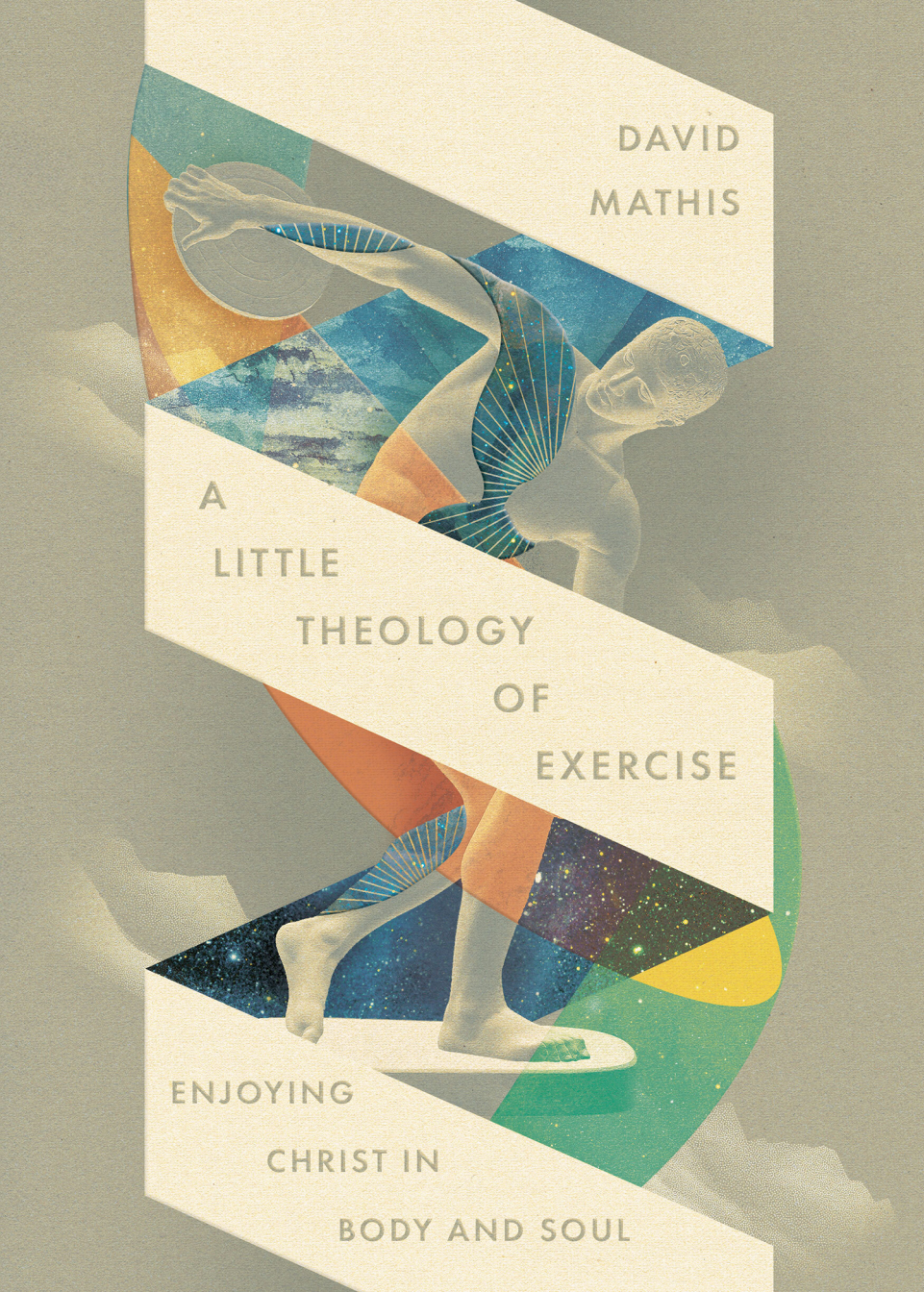


The book cover features a central illustration of a white statue of a person in a dynamic, athletic pose, possibly a runner or a person performing a yoga-like movement. The statue is set against a background of overlapping, colorful geometric shapes: a large orange semi-circle, a blue triangle, a green triangle, and a yellow triangle. The statue's torso and legs are decorated with a blue and white pattern resembling a fan or a stylized sunburst. The statue's right arm is raised, holding a white disc with concentric circles. The entire composition is framed by a white, angular border that cuts across the image. The background of the cover is a textured, light gray with soft, white, cloud-like shapes at the bottom.

DAVID
MATHIS

A
LITTLE
THEOLOGY
OF
EXERCISE

ENJOYING
CHRIST IN
BODY AND SOUL

“I’ve spent a lifetime in athletics but never thought this deeply about the glory of God in training the body, mind, and soul. David’s vision (and Scripture’s!) of a vigorous life to the glory of God truly inspires, and I’ll walk into the gym differently this week.”

Rick Barnes, Head Basketball Coach, University of Tennessee

“In *A Little Theology of Exercise*, David Mathis has written a unique and timely book to help Christians think spiritually about exercise in a sedentary age. Specifically, he answers the question ‘How can the joy of exercise serve joy in God?’ David skillfully avoids the pitfalls of either idolizing or ignoring the body by presenting a theology of the body from creation to fall to redemption to glorification. And so he presents a short theological manual packed with godly motivations for the use of the body to the glory of God. This book will challenge you, but it will also change the way you think about spiritual pleasure and physical exercise.”

Gavin Peacock, former professional footballer; Locum Pastor, Bethersden Baptist Church, UK; author, *A Greater Glory: From Pitch to Pulpit*

“‘Little’ is putting it lightly. David Mathis’s *A Little Theology of Exercise* is a work for such a time as this. Despite spending more on being healthy than ever before, Americans live in a largely sedentary culture and face a growing obesity epidemic. Given that context, his work strikes a necessary balance between convicting admonitions and instructive exhortations. Filled with biblical truths that highlight the remarkably designed human body with its God-given capacity for exercise, the book provides an excellent theological framework by which Christians should engage in exercise. I am especially grateful for David’s enlightening, embodied approach to exercise, one that recognizes the value of both soul and body health. Whether you exercise five days a week or five days a year, if you desire to glorify God with your life—with your body—I highly recommend his book.”

Lainey Greer, Founder, Your Body Matters; author, *Embodied Holiness: The Biblical Call to Bodily Care*

“David Mathis offers a biblical vision for physical exercise that reveals the deep connection between body and soul. Rather than viewing exercise as a secular activity or a means of self-improvement, Mathis reframes it as a God-given gift that can enhance joy in Christ to the glory of God. Whether you’re an athlete or someone simply seeking a more faithful approach to fitness, this book will challenge and encourage you.”

Jeremy Treat, Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Reality LA,
Los Angeles, California; Professor of Theology, Biola University;
author, *The Crucified King*; *Seek First*; *The Atonement*; and *Renewal in Christ*

“There is a growing obsession on social media with health matters. Apparently, everyone has a health tip! There’s a type of idolatry and legalism that creeps into such discussions. The solution isn’t to avoid these worthwhile topics but to look at them as Christians should: We are body-souls; and any discussion that considers exercise, for example, should remember that fact. David Mathis has offered a highly useful book that highlights the importance of exercise, but he does not forget that we are made in the image of God, created for his service, and most useful as we give our whole person to the Lord’s work.”

Mark Jones, Senior Minister, Faith Reformed Presbyterian Church,
Vancouver, British Columbia

“The importance of regular exercise is an oft-overlooked topic in the Christian community. In *A Little Theology of Exercise*, David Mathis provides a theologically rich yet accessible look at how bodily stewardship serves our joy in God. This brief and inviting book will benefit those who already enjoy regular exercise as well as those who need a little motivation to get moving. I look forward to giving it to the men and women who take my fitness classes!”

Sharonda Cooper, Bible teacher; elite fitness instructor

“David Mathis has written this wonderfully helpful book about the vital role of using our bodies in our enjoyment of God. I loved reading his biblically grounded thinking that insightfully shows that the body is a marvelous gift from God but, like all his gifts, is a means to the much greater end of glorifying God through delighting in him. This book will make you want to go for a run and worship God as you do.”

K. Erik Thoennes, Professor of Theology, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University; Pastor, Grace Evangelical Free Church, La Mirada, California

“Mathis opens *A Little Theology of Exercise* with 1 Corinthians 6:19–20: ‘You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.’ He then dives deep into this truth, clarifying what our culture has obscured. God amazingly designed our bodies not for self-worship but for his glory—not to remain sedentary but to be vigorously used in service to him. Mathis urges us to be wise stewards of our bodies by staying fit, which enables us to serve God more fervently, find greater delight in him, and glorify him through our bodies. Read this book! Its rich theology will transform your perspective on exercising and help you find joy in offering your body as a living sacrifice to God.”

Bobby Scott, Pastor of Discipleship, Community of Faith Bible Church, South Gate, California; Council Member, The Gospel Coalition; former track and field all-American

“At the core of every Christian’s perspective on physical health and fitness is a motive that either seeks transformation or opts for the status quo. In this important book, David Mathis makes the biblical and gospel-centered case for joyfully pursuing a fit and balanced life for its physical, mental, and spiritual benefits—for the glory of God. In a Christian culture that rightly rejects the extremes of a sedentary or idolatrous life, we find in this Scripture-saturated work a joyful rationale for doing hard things as a means to meeting the needs of others, enjoying God more deeply, and experiencing the joy God has on offer.”

David Bush, Founder, Fit for the King; author, *The Body Gospel* and *Fit for the King: Your Health and God’s Purpose for Your Life*

A Little Theology of Exercise

A Little Theology of Exercise

Enjoying Christ in Body and Soul

David Mathis

 **CROSSWAY®**
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

A Little Theology of Exercise: Enjoying Christ in Body and Soul

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*To John and Jon
Founders,
Desiring God*

*You are not your own,
for you were bought with a price.
So glorify God in your body.*

I CORINTHIANS 6:19–20

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Preface

“MAN HAS HELD THREE VIEWS OF HIS BODY,” writes C. S. Lewis in his 1960 book *The Four Loves*.

First there is that of those ascetic Pagans who called it the prison or the “tomb” of the soul, and [others] to whom it was a “sack of dung,” food for worms, filthy, shameful, a source of nothing but temptation to bad men and humiliation to good ones. Then there are the Neo-Pagans . . . , the nudists and the sufferers from Dark Gods, to whom the body is glorious. But thirdly we have the view which St. Francis expressed by calling his body “Brother Ass.”¹

Lewis then comments, “All three may be . . . defensible; but give me St. Francis for my money.” He continues, “Ass

1 C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (1960; repr., Harcourt Brace, 1988), 100–101.

is exquisitely right because no one in his senses can either revere or hate a donkey. It is a useful, sturdy, lazy, obstinate, patient, lovable and infuriating beast; deserving now a stick and now a carrot; both pathetically and absurdly beautiful. So the body.”²

Just as Lewis saw these three enduring views of the human body in his day, so too we see them today. We have our ascetic (or digital) pagans, who find their physical body a prison that holds them back. But now screens and virtual reality create new possibilities. Life, for many, in the tech age has become shockingly sedentary, planted endlessly in front of screens and living increasingly through their devices.

Meanwhile, those same screens display image after image of meticulously sculpted and enhanced human bodies—these are Lewis’s neo-pagans (half-nudists, at least) for whom the body is glorious or *must be glorious*, no matter the cost, however much dieting and exercise and surgery it requires.

Yet third, we have perhaps the road least traveled: Saint Francis’s road. Lewis’s road. And the road I aim to travel in this book. We might even call this the road of Christian Hedonists—*Christian* Hedonists. Today’s non-Christian hedonists may divide themselves up, more or less, between sedentary,

2 Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 101.

digital paganism and semi-exhibitionist neo-paganism, while we *Christian* Hedonists are gladly left with “Brother Ass.”

I recognize the word *ass* is arresting. It accents our natural, sinful laziness and obstinance—the “infuriating beast” deserving the stick, as Lewis says. But let’s not miss the affection and warmth in the word *brother*. Lewis does not say “brother” lightly. Just as Jesus doesn’t say “brother” lightly. And I don’t repeat “brother” lightly. *Brother* accents the usefulness, sturdiness, patience, and lovability of these bodies that are “absurdly beautiful.” And even here, in recognizing their beauty, Lewis steers a careful course between genuine appreciation and holy reverence—our bodies are not to be worshiped but acknowledged and enjoyed as, in the words of the psalmist, “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14).

We Christian Hedonists

I am a pastor and Christian teacher. I am not a personal trainer. I am not a dietician. In fact, I have hardly anything to say in this book about diet—except a general plug for moderation and a broad warning about drinking sugar. But as a Christian Hedonist—as one persuaded that *God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him*—I have a serious interest in how the human body serves not only natural joy but also spiritual joy. And I hope, as a Christian Hedonist,

that the approach of this book will land on the reader far more like a carrot than a stick.³

Question 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) asks, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” The answer is this: “That I am not my own, but belong—*body and soul*, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.”⁴ Much could be said about how the life of the soul affects the life of the body, and this will be implicit at some places in the following study. But in this short book, I’d like to focus on *stewarding the body*—and in particular moving the body, exercising and exerting the body, even training and conditioning the body—in service of the soul (our joy), for the praise of God (his glory), and for the good of others (love).

My hope is that this book will be useful to a wide swath of Christians—not just those already convinced of the opportunity physical exercise can be to serve spiritual life. My prayer is that Christians who are living largely sedentary lives, who are ready to consider some new habits, and who want to harness the possibilities in bodily exertion to assist their

3 For more on “Christian Hedonism,” see John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, rev. ed. (Crossway, 2025), or in summary form, John Piper, *The Dangerous Duty of Delight: The Glorified God and the Satisfied Soul* (Multnomah, 2001), or visit desiringGod.org.

4 “The Heidelberg Catechism,” in *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms: A Reader’s Edition*, ed. Chad Van Dixhoorn (Crossway, 2022), 291 (emphasis added).

PREFACE

joy in God will find this short study accessible and inspiring. I hope it will help you, in the context of our sedentary age, to realize and leverage the potential of your body in the service of Christian joy. I want you to freshly appreciate the gift and wonder of our bodies, designed by God for movement and exertion, as aids in our call to glorify him and as assistants (rather than obstacles) to life-transforming joy in Christ and acts of love toward others.

I also hope that Christians who are already active in physical fitness but often tempted by shallow and sinful motivations will find here the (little) theology to undergird, inform, and shape their bodily training. I pray that those who are already dedicated to exercise but driven by worldly and selfish reasons would find solid, reinforcing biblical reasons to modestly train their bodies in service to their calling as Christians to be happy in God and glorify him in their bodies.

David Mathis

SAINT PAUL, MINNESOTA

Introduction

Joy Set Before Us

WHY WOULD A PASTOR, of all people, write a book about exercise?

In short, I want to help people know and enjoy Jesus more and, so, make much of him in the world as he deserves. As a pastor, that often means that I'm speaking and writing about Jesus himself,¹ or teaching portions of the Bible, or commending various *spiritual* disciplines (which I call “habits of grace”²). And God made us embodied creatures. The *physical* body has a vital part to play in our spiritual and holistic health and God-honoring joy. In my adult life, especially in

1 For instance, David Mathis, *Rich Wounds: The Countless Treasures of the Life, Death, and Triumph of Jesus* (Good Book, 2022).

2 David Mathis, *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus Through the Spiritual Disciplines* (Crossway, 2016).

the last decade, I've found that *physical exercise serves my soul*, and I'm eager to commend that to you to serve your growth "in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18).

To be clear, my appreciation for exercise and "bodily training" (1 Tim. 4:8) is not as an end in itself. One of the reasons I take exercise seriously, rather than neglecting it, is precisely because of how it serves the joy, strength, and stability of my soul.

The issue of deliberate physical exercise, in service of the Christian life, may be more pressing in our times than for saints of old who lived in far less sedentary societies. The industrial revolution, modern travel and labor-saving technologies, and (in particular) the invention of the television—all alongside the modern diet—have brought significant changes in recent generations. In my own lifetime, the advent of the personal computer in the 1980s, the internet in the 1990s, and the smartphone in 2007 has left many of us still coming to grips with how sedentary human life can be if we are conformed to the pattern of our world. But this has not always been so. God made us to move and to do so vigorously. And he wired our brains to leverage vigorous movement, reward it, and reinforce it. Exercise makes happier humans, and God made humans to be happy—in him—with bodily movement being an assistant, rather than an adversary, to Christ-exalting joy.

Embracing Our Humanity

Even those of us with fulltime jobs and small children typically have enough time for the real nonnegotiables of life: daily Bible meditation and prayer, weekly corporate worship, midweek Christian fellowship, generous family time, reasonable work hours, adequate sleep, *and modest exercise*.

I had a regular pattern of exercise through much of my twenties but let my habits lapse after getting married and having twin boys three years later. In the summer of 2015, I got serious about exercise again. It had been about seven years of general sedentariness. Strenuous physical activity had become far more the exception than the rule. On a June evening, while walking with my wife, I complained about not having enough time to exercise. She didn't buy it. It was a matter of my priorities, she said. I had enough time in the morning for both Bible and exercise before the kids were up. And besides, I had no business filling my schedule with so many commitments if basic human needs like sleep and exercise were continually delinquent.

So I finally owned up to the fact that if I was not getting some minimal regular exercise, I must be making some bad choices and trying to do too many things, or I must be investing my time unwisely. In a new way, I was coming to grips

with my humanity. For me, making exercise a priority has had a lot to do with embracing my finitude and making time for the basics of both being a Christian (through personal and corporate habits of grace) and being human, including adequate sleep and moderate exercise.

Wonder of Movement

In the 2009 bestseller *Born to Run*, journalist Christopher McDougall marvels at the human anatomy and physiology and at our ability for endurance running.³ But humans are not just born to run. While animals tend to excel at one or two main abilities, God built humans for countless capacities, with the ability to adapt, specialize, and excel in many ways.

According to Harvard psychiatrist John Ratey, humans are “the Swiss Army knives of motion”:

The research on this shows no favoritism, no sweet spot according to any one activity, no real specialization, and this result is counter to what’s found with any other species. For other species, one can make a categorical statement like “born to gallop,” but for humans, no. Born to run?

³ Christopher McDougall, *Born to Run: A Hidden Tribe, Superathletes, and the Greatest Race the World Has Never Seen* (Knopf, 2009).

Yes indeed, but also born for doing other activities as well. Humans are the Swiss Army knives of motion.⁴

In what other species do you see a variety that stretches from linebackers to ballerinas? Average humans like me tend to think of professional athletes and dancers as flukes of nature, born with something the rest of us were not. As we sit in front of the television or in a stadium or theater seat, it sure seems in that moment like we could never do what they're doing. *I could never move my body like that. I never could have been nearly that strong or fast.*

But what if we pause for a minute and think about how different our lives have been for the last twenty years, compared to these professionals? Or thirty years. Or forty. We were born far more alike than we tend to think. These masters of movement who capture our attention were not born with the ability to do gymnastics, or jump high into the air and land on ice skates, or hit a hundred-mile-per-hour fastball.

4 John Ratey, *Go Wild: Free Your Body and Mind from the Afflictions of Civilization* (Little and Brown, 2014), 26. Elsewhere, he adds, "The human body is unique among the bodies of our close relatives, our fellow mammals, in not having a sweet spot, in having muscles and a supporting skeletal system designed for a whole variety of movements." Ratey, 121.

Rather, the human body in its divine design is capable of developing remarkable skills through practice and conditioning. However much we tend to overestimate what our bodies can do in the short run, we typically underestimate what they can do in the long run. Of course, what so markedly sets us apart from the animal kingdom, even according to evolutionary biologists, is the human brain. There is nothing else in our gloriously created world that comes close to being as advanced, complex, and astounding as the human brain.

I mention the brain in particular because of the part it plays in the wonder of human movement. The size, complexity, and power of the human brain correlate with our ability to move like no other creature. It can be amazing to watch humans move. As Ratey observes, “Sedentary as we may be, we still pay enormous amounts of money and invest enormous amounts of cultural capital in watching people move, obviously so with sports but consider, too, movement like ballet. What other species could accomplish this level of variation and control in pure movement?”⁵

Beautiful Feet and Hands

When’s the last time you paused to ponder the wonder of feet? Not just their oddness and elegance but the fact that we

5 Ratey, *Go Wild*, 101.

have them at all. Unlike plants and trees, we are not tethered in place by roots. We are not left to wait for the world to come to us. Rather, we can go into the world—indeed, Jesus commissioned us to do so (Matt. 28:19–20)—to step, walk, run, dance, and move. According to McDougall, “Leonardo da Vinci considered the human foot, with its fantastic weight-suspension system comprising one quarter of all the bones in the human body, ‘a masterpiece of engineering and a work of art.’”⁶

Irish physical therapist Gerard Hartmann, who works with some of the world’s finest distance runners, says,

Blueprint your feet, and you’ll find a marvel that engineers have been trying to match for centuries. Your foot’s centerpiece is the arch, the greatest weight-bearing design ever created. The beauty of any arch is the way it gets stronger under stress; the harder you push down, the tighter its parts mesh. . . . Buttressing the foot’s arch from all sides is a high-tensile web of twenty-six bones, thirty-three joints, twelve rubbery tendons, and eighteen muscles, all stretching and flexing like an earthquake-resistant suspension bridge.⁷

⁶ McDougall, *Born to Run*, 156.

⁷ Quoted in McDougall, *Born to Run*, 176–77.

What about the wonder of your human hands? Isaac Newton supposedly said, “In the absence of any other proof, the thumb alone would convince me of God’s existence.”⁸ Not only do we move about the world on our feet and legs but also reach, extend, grasp, and touch with our arms and hands. We use them to work, lift, tear, cut, build, push, and pull.

No material entity in God’s created world is more complex, fascinating, marvelous, and valuable than human life, which God designed to specially reflect him in his world. The reason your body and brain are so marvelous, so fearfully and wonderfully made, is to point to God—even as, in this fallen world, “our outer self is wasting away” (2 Cor. 4:16). One day, sin and death will be no more, and we will have a glorified resurrection body. Then we will experience, beyond imagination, the full, unhindered wonder of feet and hands and movement to the glory of God.

Sedentary Times

Alongside breathing, eating, thinking, feeling, and speaking, one of the great fundamentals of human life is movement. Bodily activity is so basic, so obvious, often so assumed,

⁸ The quotation is often attributed to Newton, but I am unable to identify its source.

that we easily overlook what a veritable superpower it is. Yet movement is one vital aspect of our enduring human nature that our present age threatens to undermine.

Few today would disagree that we are living in a sedentary age compared to generations and centuries before us. One great downside of the exponential burst of modern technologies is that our bodies and their movement seem to matter less and less. As a fellow pastor insightfully observes, “Much of what we call ‘technology’ does not actually help us to become more productive at our work but rather does our work for us. While claiming to help us become more efficient, this sort of technology actually trains us to do little or nothing at all.”⁹

We have cars, and we walk far less. We have machines and other labor-saving devices, and so we use our hands less. We have screens, and we move less. Added to that, in our prosperity and decadence, food and (sugar-saturated) drinks are available to us like never before.¹⁰

9 Steven Wedgworth, “Your Family Is the Frontlines: Three Ways to Recover the Christian Home,” *Desiring God*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.desiringgod.org/>.

10 According to the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, now more than 40 percent of US adults are considered obese. For a short treatment of sugar (honey) from a biblical standpoint, see David Mathis, “What Is Sweeter Than Honey? A Little Theology of Sugar,” *Desiring God*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.desiringgod.org/>.

Unless we break the cycle, we will consume more, move our bodies less, and then find it ever harder to lift our own weight off the couch when some physical opportunity or request beckons. Simply walking upstairs becomes a mental barrier. Taking out the trash feels like more than a chore. Doing work around the house seems daunting.

We still *move*, of course—we must. But many of us have been conditioned by this present age and our own lazy impulses to *move as little as possible*. Now, economy of bodily movement has long been a survival instinct, in God's good design, to protect against starvation, but few reading this book are under any near threat of starvation today. Our need is not for conserving calories but for putting to good use the abundance of calories we consume (almost) without thinking.

To the degree that our default is to move as little as possible—rather than to move freely, eagerly, and enjoyably—we undermine or inhibit some essential dynamics in the Christian life. As Christians, we cannot content ourselves with taking our bearings from our sedentary society. Our modern excesses are not just of human concern but Christian concern.

Bodies in Motion in the Bible

Regular human movement has been assumed throughout history. For instance, consider what we gather about the

normalcy of bodily movement and activity from the Old and New Testaments. In one sense, we might simply observe, “They had no planes, trains, and automobiles.” Adam and Eve walked out of the garden when they sinned and spent the rest of their lives working the ground with their own hands and whatever tools they were able to produce. Noah and his sons built an ark as big as a football field with their own hands and sweat. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were nomads—that is, they moved around and walked, herding sheep for their livelihood. So, too, Joseph and his brothers walked. Pharaoh put the Israelites to hard labor. Moses, no matter how comfortable his first forty years may have been, spent his last eighty on his feet. Which brings us to the wilderness generation, when God’s people *wandered*, that is, moved about the desert for forty years.

In the time of the judges, we are confronted with two clearly negative examples of obesity: Eglon (Judg. 3:17, 22) and Eli (1 Sam. 4:18). Fat food was a blessing; fat men were not. King David, on the other hand, is represented as a kind of physical specimen. He killed Goliath *in his youth*, and he manifestly was no weak man. He was a man of war—skilled and fearsome—and according to Psalm 18 was not only deadly with projectiles but also able to outrun other men with his speed, agility, and strength.

Inactivity in Scripture spells disaster, in time, for nations and generations, as in Deuteronomy 31:20: “When I have brought them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I swore to give to their fathers, and they have eaten and are full and grown fat, they will turn to other gods and serve them, and despise me and break my covenant” (so also Deut. 32:15; Jer. 5:28). And when such national and literal fatness led to the destruction of the holy city by a foreign army, serving as the instrument of God’s covenant justice, then the people walked on their own two feet some seven hundred miles around the desert to Babylon. And seventy years later, when Cyrus the Persian issued his decree that the temple could be rebuilt, that may have sounded like great news for believing exiles, but only a fraction of them actually took up the seven-hundred-mile journey to move back home.

In the Body, for the Soul

Fast forward to the first century and consider how much Jesus walked. It’s over one hundred miles from Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee to Jerusalem. That’s not a long trip in a car or bus. But on foot? It makes for five to ten travel days—that is, walking all or most of the day. Then ponder the missionary journeys of the apostle Paul!

All this to say, one of the major differences between our times and biblical times, very practically, relates to our technologies. One of the main manifestations of that is the general sedentariness of our lives compared to theirs. And if the above summary of biblical bodily exertion makes you tired just thinking about it, consider how the orientation of our modern age on physical activity, compared to the preindustrial world, affects how we think about *doing good* for others—because doing good typically requires bodily exertion in some form. Good comes into being through working, not wishing. And apart from that, the sedentariness of our bodies is not disconnected but deeply integrated with our inner person—with our minds, hearts, and wills.

This may be one of the most surprising aspects of this study. This book is not only (or mainly) about the body but also the soul. Our bodies and souls are profoundly and mysteriously connected. What we do with one can deeply affect the other. We train our souls through conditioning our bodies, and what we do with our souls can greatly affect our bodies. This is why, as a pastor, I've written this book *on exercise* for Christians: because what we do (and don't do) with our bodies does affect our faith, our minds, our joys (with the whole range of our emotions), and our wills (whether we're willing and eager to exert our bodies to do others good).

Countless unbelievers come to experience and enjoy the many benefits of exercise but do not adore Jesus or have the Holy Spirit. My concern is *how a Christian might exercise* differently than an unbeliever. How do we experience God's natural gift of physical exercise in such a way that we profit spiritually?

More to the point, how does the joy of exercise serve joy in God? The answer begins with theology and becomes very practical in our motivations and approach to working out. My burden is to persuade Christians of the joy and value of modest bodily training and to encourage them not merely to *factor in God* to our exercise but to *put him at the center*.

Another way to put it would be to ask, *How do I make exercise holy?* To that we turn in part 1.

PART 1

MOVE THE BODY

Making Exercise Christian

How do I make exercise holy?

We could approach this little theology of exercise from many angles. We could simply begin with what the Christian Scriptures teach about our bodies and then seek to make our own personal applications in that light. Or another angle is to ask the personal questions, How do I make my exercise holy? How do I make it count for God? For eternity? For what matters most? How do I exercise with God, not self, at the center?

For me, and I hope for you too, it's not enough to enjoy fitness and just happen to be a Christian. So we turn first to 1 Timothy 4, where we find some important truths about our bodies. However, we will not (yet) go where you might be expecting—to 4:8 about “bodily training.” Rather, here's 1 Timothy 4:1–5:

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

First, mark the anti-body orientation of the false teachers Paul opposes. They are suspicious of, to the point of opposing, basic bodily pleasures that God designed. These false teachers forbid marriage (implying the marriage bed) and certain foods. Paul does not mention *physical exercise*, but clearly the full embrace of bodily existence is in view. And 4:8 is only a

breath away with its mention of “bodily training.” So this is a fitting place and context to draw out some applications to exercise—that is, “voluntary physical activity undertaken for the sake of health and fitness.”¹

Paul writes in 1 Timothy 4:4–5 that “everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.” I’ll say more in part 2 about thanksgiving, but first let’s ponder how life in the body is “made holy.” How is the marriage bed made holy, and how are eating and drinking made holy? Paul says, “by the word of God and prayer.”

Now, what does that mean? How do God’s word and prayer “make holy” various bodily acts for which God designed and made us? In chapter 1, we will focus on “God’s word” for our bodies (and exercise), and in chapter 2, we will turn to prayer—and very practically how we might respond in

1 Daniel Lieberman, *Exercised: Why Something We Never Evolved to Do Is Healthy and Rewarding* (Pantheon, 2021), xii. Lieberman observes that “until recently only great kings and queens could enjoy taking it easy whenever they wanted. Today in a bizarre reversal of the human condition, voluntary physical activity for the sake of health—a.k.a. exercise—has become a privilege for the privileged. In addition to being surrounded by laborsaving devices, billions of people have jobs and commutes that prevent them from being physically active by requiring them to sit for most of the day.” Lieberman, 47–48.

prayer to what God tells us about our bodies. Then, in part 2 (chapters 3–7), we will explore various Christian motivations and incentives for exercise.

So what does God's word say about our bodies and their exercise?