

6 ESSENTIALS FOR YOUR BODY – Week 2

Monday, May 3

Last week, we began looking at the human body, our bodies and the life we live in the body. This week, we begin looking at the key ingredients that help us support healthy living in these glorious bodies God has given to us. It might surprise you that we don't begin with nutrition or exercise. We begin with the need for each other. God created us for life in community. Why did God do this? First, God himself lives in the unbroken community of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is this self-giving community that lies at the center of all that is or ever will be. We need community because He made us in his image and to share in the life of the community of the Trinity. Second, it is for this reason that as human beings we require community. Each day you eat food grown by someone you do not know, use resources secured by others, and rely on other people to share in work of supporting human life. You live in a house and drive a car built by someone else. It is this simple: we need other people to sustain our lives. So, we should not be surprised that health is a group effort, a community enterprise.

Here's our text for today:

Acts 2:42-47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Pentecost was an important day in the Jewish calendar. It was the time when all the people came together to thank God for the first fruits of the coming harvest. It was at this celebration in Jerusalem that the apostles first publicly declared the gospel to the Jewish people. God equipped the apostles to share the message in a way that everyone could understand. The response was surprising. Three thousand people were added to the number of believers. This must have been a sight to behold. Almost immediately we are told that these new believers began meeting together, listening to the teaching of the apostles, sharing meals in their homes and finding ways to support each other. This new community came to be called the church. But, think about that. Don't we think we are pretty much on our own? We believe we have to figure out our lives by ourselves and for ourselves. But this is not the way the first believers saw life. Perhaps, you feel this way about your health. You have to take care of yourself by yourself. But, this is not God's intention for us, not his plan. We need each other to be healthy. How so? First, we need others to help us establish a vision of health. Maybe you have seen this. When you see someone else begin to eat healthy, you feel the pull in that direction yourself. When a friend begins working out, you consider doing so yourself. God made us to function like a flock. Our community is united by a vision of life cultivated in the gospel, the awareness that all of life is a gift of God. It is this vision that guides our community. During the days ahead, the idea is to strengthen the bonds of community so that we can support each other in every way, our health included. Community groups are one of the formal ways we can do this. We can meet each week and discuss what we are learning and support each other as we apply what we learn. There are many informal ways to do this. You can form a walking group with others who can hold you accountable to your goals for getting healthy, or gather a few others to work out during the week with you. The *6 Essentials Challenge* (40-day challenge) is a way to join with the community to create a healthy lifestyle together. The message in all of this is that we need each other to be healthy and

strong. Now, those first believers in Jesus likely would not have had a chance if they had remained apart and alone, but together a new community was formed that provided each person support, and they applied the gospel in their lives.

Let's pray together:

Lord God, thank you for the community of Jesus, people that encourage and support me in my faith. We so easily withdraw and remain by ourselves. Help us by your grace to choose community over isolation, fellowship over separation. Remind us each day that we need each other. Teach us how to walk together, to encourage and rely on one another. Also, help us to think not only about personal success but also about the interests of each other. In your name, we pray. Amen.

Tuesday, May 4

A few years back now, the New England Journal of Medicine published a fascinating study. The article was written by two researchers that studied a large social network, over 12,000 people, for thirty-two years. What they found was that obesity was contagious socially. Here is what they discovered: *A person's chances of becoming obese increased by 57% if he or she had a friend who became obese in a given interval. Among pairs of adult siblings, if one sibling became obese, the chance that the other would become obese increased by 40%. If one spouse became obese, the likelihood that the other spouse would become obese increased by 37%. These effects were not seen among neighbors in the immediate geographic location.* Their study showed how social connections impact health outcomes. We are likely to adopt the health practices of those we are closest to. Now, in our study, 6 Essentials for Your Body, we're taking this week to understand and apply this truth. The researchers discovered what scripture said. We are social creatures, and behaviors and lifestyles are contagious in close social networks. In laypeople's terms, this means that you will become more and more like the people surrounding you, the people you get close to. This also means that by surrounding yourself with people going the direction you want to go, you will have a greater likelihood of going in that direction as well.

Now, here is our scripture for today:

Mark 3:13-14

¹³ Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. ¹⁴ He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach.

Today, we are learning the power of presence. Mark tells us in his gospel that Jesus sought out the disciples to be with him. Why did he do that? Certainly, he did not want to be alone. He alone could become our savior, but he would not carry out his ministry alone. He would do so in the company of other men. He was seeking "withness," presence. Before the disciples would become his witnesses, they would be his withnesses. Let's not miss the power of Jesus' ministry with the disciples. It was more than teaching and commissioning. They were changed, formed by being with Jesus.

Here's what the religious leaders said about the disciples later on:

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. -Acts 4:13

Yes, they were shaped by being with Jesus. That is where their courage came from. This begs the question for each of us: who have you chosen to be with? Who are you giving your "withness" to? Now, this has special importance as we are getting healthy. We can choose to surround ourselves with people going the same direction that we are. Now,

this doesn't mean that we exclude people from our circle of friends, but it means we enlist people in friendship to share the journey with us. First, this begins at home with the people you are closest to. Do you need to have a conversation about working together to guard or improve the health of all in your household? How can you assist each other in doing so? Then outside the home, can you join with others for an exercise program? All of us need a tribe to remain healthy. Perhaps, there is someone that you can invite, to join them, as a way to support that person in healthy living. Now, as we think about this, we also have the chance to add a spiritual dimension. We are not thinking about food and exercise alone. You can pray with and for each other. As we learn more this week, we're going to see the power of association and community. It is not good to be alone. God has provided us an amazing sense of community in our congregation, and we have the opportunity to stand together and work together to encourage health. The disciples were shaped by the presence of Jesus, and we will be shaped by each other as well.

Let's pray:

Our loving heavenly Father, we often think we must do life on our own. I can think it is all up to me. Remind me that you have surrounded me with support. Help me to see the opportunities I have to influence others, to share your grace with them in practical ways. Help me to think not only of my own interests, but also of the interests of others. In your name I pray, amen.

Wednesday, May 5

Home, home on the range. Where the deer and the antelope play. Where never is heard a discouraging word and the skies are not cloudy all day. I learned that song as a young child. This is a land I long for. It sounds beautiful, right? But, where can we find a place without a discouraging word? Now, as we are learning about the power of community in our health, we learn the power of our words. As the book of Proverbs reminds us: *Gracious words are sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.* (Proverbs 16:24) It is said that Freud discovered this truth. He had pretty much summed up human life as mere biology when he noticed how his patients' dispositions could be changed by encouragement. It was a surprising revelation to him. Scripture continually reminds us to support and encourage each other.

Here is Paul writing the church in Corinth:

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

¹¹ Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you. ¹² Greet one another with a holy kiss. ¹³ All God's people here send their greetings.

He tells us to encourage each other whenever we come together. Why does he tell us to do this? For two reasons. First, words themselves have power. Proverbs tells us that the tongue holds the power of life and death. Yes, our words can crush or cure. We can cheer each other on or bring each other down. God created us with his word, and he made us to be sustained and supported through the word. His Word reminds us that we are loved when we might forget. He tells us that we are his, and that we are secure. His word speaks life into us each day. Our words are meant to do the same. But the problem is our world resonates with negative and destructive words. Discouragement leaves us defeated and weary. These are words that bestow death not life. We live by praise and affirmation, words of life. Let's not underestimate the power of our words. Going back to Freud, his father said something demeaning and critical to him when he was a child. He remembered his father's criticism for the rest of his life. The same works for us. Here's the second reason and an added truth, as people know you and love you and get close to you, their words have even more power in your life. Yes, words get much of their power from our relationships. What your father or mother said to you matters a whole lot

more than the person that lives down the street. This is why God's word speaks so loudly to us. He made us and loves us and knows us better than we know ourselves. Now, going back to our scripture for today, God intends for us to grow in community in such a way that encouragement of each other helps to sustain us and build us up.

Here's Paul repeating this command to another church, the one in Ephesus:
Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.
-Ephesians 4:29

Now as we are working on our health together, let's put this into practice. Assume that the people around you need support. They need your encouragement because your words have the power to affect them, to support them. Now, the words that Paul is speaking of here are not shallow cheering, but a deep source of inspiration and connection. Your words let the other person know that you are with them, you see them, you are for them. They are not alone. What words of encouragement do you remember from the past that have influenced your well-being? Think about how your words can build others up. Think about who you can encourage today.

Let's pray:

Lord God, our world pushes us to be judges and critics of almost everyone and everything. Remind me of the power of encouragement in the lives of those that are around me. Teach me how to remain silent if I have nothing positive to say. Show me, I pray, the power of loving words chosen to give life. Thank you for speaking to me the words of life and of your steadfast love. Guide me by your Holy Spirit that I might learn your way with words. In the name of Jesus, I pray. Amen.

Thursday, May 6

Ok. We're learning about our need for others in order to be healthy. I read a book a few years back that helped me better understand this and make this teaching practical. Author Leonard Sweet wrote a terrific book on "withness" entitled, *11 Indispensable Relationships You Can't Be Without*. Sweet says that we all need a life-editor, the way Nathan the prophet was with King David. We all need a Jonathan in our lives, a true friend. We need a Timothy, an understudy and heir. We won't go through his entire list of eleven today, but I do want to focus on one of the people Sweet says we need, the first one, Nathan. If you remember the story of David, he sinned against God. He brought destruction and pain into his life, but who could confront him about it? Only God's prophet, Nathan, dared to do this. What did he do? He helped keep David's ego in check by challenging him to think about what he had done. He asked David questions to make him face himself and to face God. He told him the truth when frankly everyone else kept their distance in fear. Who dares to tell the king he is wrong? But David is thankful for it. It saved David from a lifetime mired in his own sin. The loving confrontation of Nathan opened the way for David's repentance and forgiveness. Now, Leonard Sweet says that as every writer needs a good editor, someone that can cut away what needs to be removed, every person needs a life-editor. Every life needs revision.

Here are two verses from the book of Proverbs that speak of this:

Proverbs 15:22

Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.

Proverbs 27:17

As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.

Now in our culture today, we are not really supposed to challenge other people's decisions, even people close to us, our people. But this is what is called for. First, we need other people we love and respect to look at our lives, not as critics, but as those that want the best for us. That person may not always be right, but if love is the motivation, there is much we can learn. Of course, we have to welcome their insights and consider their input. How many of our plans fail because we can see them only from our own perspective? We can almost always be helped with another way of looking at things. We need this kind of counsel from those committed to us. This is one of the major benefits of living in community. Solomon says this is the way iron sharpens iron. You will be able to stay sharp and keep focused with the help of someone that loves you. But what I have found is this. You need to give permission for that person to speak into your life. It helps to say to them, "Please tell me what you think." Or, "what is your perspective here?" Of course, you can't sharpen iron with jello! You need someone that will tell it to you straight, someone that loves you enough to speak the hard truth you need to hear. Now, as we are learning about our health and hopefully getting healthier, this person will be essential in providing the wisdom, the support, and the challenge to help keep you on track. There is one final person I want to mention from Sweet's book. He says that all of us need a Jethro. He calls this person a butt-kicker. Yes, you heard that right. If you remember the story of Moses, he was wearing himself out by trying to provide all the leadership the people needed. Of course, this was impossible and exhausting. His father-in-law showed up in the camp of Israel one day to visit with his family, and Jethro told Moses what he saw. What are you doing? What made you think this was a good idea? You have got to be kidding me. Jethro challenged Moses to put other leaders in place that could share the load. He kicked Moses' butt, you might say. This is another person we need to be with us on the journey. All of us have times when we need this friend to call us to account. Don't think this isn't encouraging to have this person in your life. This person can see what is needed when you can't see it or can't admit it. Your Jethro can show you that you are not crazy and help you to find a better way forward.

Let's pray:

Faithful God, thank you for providing loving friends who can open our eyes to see what we need. Help me to be such a friend for others through your steadfast love. Protect me from criticism and judging. Guide me, I pray, along your way of grace by your Holy Spirit. Teach me each day the wonder and the power of community. In the name of Jesus, I pray. Amen.

Friday, May 7

Years ago, I had the privilege of driving a Korean pastor to see the building of the church I was serving at the time. It was still under construction, really with just the walls and the cement slab. As we drove by, he asked me to stop. He got out of the car and walked into what was clearly the sanctuary. He wanted to know how the room was going to be set up and where the pulpit would be placed. Equipped with this knowledge he asked us to kneel with him and pray. He prayed passionately for whomever would be standing in that place and preaching the gospel. He prayed that the Holy Spirit would guide the worship services conducted in that building, and that the Lord would be present there among the people. We were all deeply moved and began looking at the building in a completely different way.

Here is our text for today:

Colossians 1:9-12

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives,¹⁰ so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the

knowledge of God, ¹¹being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, ¹²and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.

Now, I always wondered why Paul needed to tell the churches how he was praying for them. This is his prayer for the church in Colossae. But why tell them? Isn't his prayer meant just for God to hear? Of course, our prayers are first for God. Jesus taught that we are not to pray with words for people to hear but to find a place where we can pray in silence and seclusion. But Paul is not doing the wrong thing here. He is like that Korean pastor praying with us. His desire is that we would be caught up in his prayer, to join him in his prayer for the church. As we are thinking about the power of community this week, we want to think about what happens when we pray for each other and with each other. Now, we pray for each other because what we are learning and doing is not a human endeavor alone. It requires the work of God in us for us to really get healthy. Being healthy is not only about good nutrition and muscle tone. No, it means shalom. That is the Hebrew word for peace, but our word peace can't take in all that the word shalom means. We think of absence of war or strife, a situation of calm. But, the word means more like the balance of perfection, the place where every vital element in a system is whole and healthy. It is the kind of harmony God was speaking about when he created the world and said that it was good, very good. Everything was in its proper place and in its proper order. Yes, when sin came into the world there was disorder. When we are not healthy, the vital parts of our bodies, and even who we are, are not in balance. Now, scripture teaches us that because of sin and the brokenness in our world, we cannot bring our world or our own lives to shalom, complete balance and harmony. Only God can do this, and this is what Jesus promises when he tells us he has come that we might have life, life to the fullest possible extent. He's not talking about an amount of life, but a harmony of life that is true shalom. So, yes, we eat well and work out and rest well, but shalom is the gift of God. We pray for this peace for each other. That happens as Paul explains: you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way, bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience... That leads us to the second aspect of what happens when we pray with each other. Bringing people together in prayer does more than add more prayer muscle. Shalom can only come in community. It is not an individual sport. The reason this is so is that God made us for life in community, life together. Joining together in prayer brings us, as diverse a group as we are, together as one before God. Shalom is not uniformity, but a diversity brought together by the grace of God. We are so very different, but now we are joined together before the face of God. In our world, the place where we would be looking to compete with each other, or looking for superiority over each other, prayer brings us together as the body that Christ made us to be, all made possible by his cross, his love for us. So, yes, pray for each other. Let this time be not only a physical exercise but also a spiritual one, as we pray for each other and as we pray with each other. That prayer with the Korean pastor happened at least 25 years ago, and I am encouraged by that prayer even to this day.

Let's pray:

Lord God, I find that I think my health is an individual sport. I feel alone in my body, yet you show me I am in community with others that are my brothers and sisters in Christ. First, I pray for true shalom in the lives of my spiritual family. Help us to tap into the vast resources of your grace, so we might know your great love and we might come to live in balance and harmony together. Help us also to come together and pray together that we might know unity and peace that comes alone from you. For I pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Saturday, May 8

I'm not finished yet, but I've loved reading Lewis Hyde's book entitled, *The Gift*. Hyde traces the way various peoples view giving. Early on, he begins with the story of the first settlers in the new world learning about Indian-giving. An Indian chief gave an early European visitor his peace pipe as a gift. What the visitor didn't know was how gifts were viewed among Native Americans. He thought it was for himself, but the Indians believed gifts should always be on the move. They believed a gift was different than personal capital. Hyde uses the illustration of the way a billiard ball collides with another, and energy transferred from the one to the other. This is what is meant to happen with a gift. It is not meant to be kept for yourself but passed along in some way to someone else, perhaps in a different form. The chief may give you the peace pipe, but you give away your knife, and so on. Now, I bring up the nature of gifts for two reasons. First, nature of our faith centers around a gift. The gift, you might say. The word for grace in the new testament means gift, unmerited favor. Something freely given. Grace is born at the cross of Jesus where something has been given to us that we could get from nowhere else. We do nothing to deserve it. There is no way we can repay it. It is, in a sense, God's peace pipe that enables us to have fellowship with him. It is his way of bringing us into his family and giving us a home with him forever. It is this grace, this gift, that becomes the basis of our lives. We are the billiard ball struck by the love of God in Christ.

Here's is Jesus telling us about what this does to us:

John 13:34-35

³⁴ "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

You will see this is a command of Jesus. Why does he command love from us? Because it is our nature to hold on to gifts, to turn gifts into possessions of our own. Museums are filled with peace pipes. My house is more museum than anything, filled with stuff. But this is not the way of love that Jesus teaches us. He commands us to love as he has loved because it is this love that alone can form the new community, the new human family Jesus came to establish. That's the second reason. It is the gift-love of Jesus that keeps the planets in their orbits, that gives and sustains life for us all. It is this gift-love that is the very basis of our community. It is more than the essentials. It is the engine for all the others. So, let's break down this grace and see how it works out in our lives and in our community. What is grace? In its simplest form, it is the supply of what we do not have ourselves. Let's take an example. You may never be disciplined enough to exercise four times a week on your own, but a friend commits to show up and to be present with you. That person cannot guarantee your health, but her love provides an immense source of strength for you to fulfill your goal. She lets you know that you don't owe her a thing for that. You soon learn she is there because of love. It is this love in the simplest of things that supplies what you do not have yourself. It is in this unconditional giving that the new community can emerge. It is not about owing or about what you can get. Instead, it shows in a small way the nature of the love of Jesus. One such gift may not seem like much, but people living together in community in this way will get the world's notice. Soon other people will find themselves caught up in the tide of unconditional love. This is why it is the greatest thing in the world. The gift that comes from Jesus like the billiard ball transfers the gift to the next person, and so on. A brother in Christ has a difficult time eating healthy. You love this brother, so you arrange to eat together a few times each week. It is the loving support and presence of a brother that begins to make a difference. Your brother has no other reason to do this than love. It is in such moments that you can see Jesus. You see, we may take the challenge of this study as a personal challenge, but your life is shaped here in community, where love is given and received, where sacrifices

are regularly being made for the benefit of others. You see, this gift-love as it turns out is always sacrificial. It always costs. It takes time. In a sense, you are giving yourself away.

Here is where it comes from:

Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. -Philippians 2:4-8

Ok. It may not be the best analogy, but think of yourself as that billiard ball, struck by the love of Jesus, and now making contact with others, sharing his grace and unconditional love. Keeping his love always on the move.

Let's pray:

Lord God, it is true that we want to build our own capital. You gave us the gift of Jesus, and his grace is always on the move. May his grace continue to rest upon me and also to flow to others. Reveal to me the way the small sacrificial gifts help to build our community, how what I do can support other people. I pray for them as well, that we may learn this way of love together. In Jesus' name. Amen.