

You Pick The Sermon: How Should Christians Look At The Body, Frailty, and Death In A Health-Obsessed Culture?

By Jason Huff

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Psalm 39; Colossians 2:8-3:1; Mark 7:1-2,5,14-23

Our final Scripture reading tonight comes from Mark 7:1-2,5,14-23. May the Word of God touch our hearts afresh tonight. “The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were "unclean," that is, unwashed...so the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?"... Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.'" After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. "Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean.") He went on: "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'”

What is good health worth? It's a global question. Some countries offer cradle-to-grave care, though its costs become a concern. Other countries can't even provide their people clean drinking water. American Christians give over 1.6 billion dollars a year in international medical aid. Living better is a concern for everyone, and it's such a big issue that it's hard to tackle.

But in America, we aren't just concerned with good health, we're obsessed with it. I walked into Panera this week and saw a sign urging me to “taste clean.” They've removed all sorts of ingredients from their food that have become unpopular. My diet program just discontinued an entire line of products because they had saturated fat. Our food vocabulary has grown the last five years: gluten, organic, vegan. Schools are now nut-free; the peanut butter sandwiches we all grew up eating everyday have been banished. For a while, pizza went from being the most popular food at my boys' school to the least. Why? To receive government funding, they had to switch to whole-wheat crust...until the government gave them an exception because the kids stopped eating altogether on pizza day. Artificial is bad; natural is good. We're to the point that people are shamed on Facebook and Twitter for drinking diet sodas or not following the Paleo diet.

Our health obsession goes far beyond food. We worry we might have done something to harm our kids, whether we ate the wrong foods during pregnancy or immunized them or gave them baby formula. We look for ways to fix the damage. The leading company selling “essential oils,” a huge trend in some Christian circles, says on their website that you will “discover lifelong wellness” that will “empower you to energize your life and reclaim your natural radiance.” If we don't buy into the latest fad, will we be harming or helping? We are burdened with guilt over what foods we eat, medicines we take, and exercises we do.

So today's You Pick The Sermon question is really important. We're tackling today how Christians should look at the body, frailty, and death from a biblical perspective in a health-obsessed culture. When we grasp what the Bible teaches on the subject, it should put our hearts and minds at rest while challenging us to think about what our health obsession says about God.

For us to understand what Scripture says about health, we need to start with its foundation, and it's this: *the body matters to God*. We are embodied. In Genesis, God doesn't create a spirit and then give that spirit a body. He creates Adam's body from the dust. Then God breathes the breath of life into him. Only at that point does Adam become a living being. Adam has a body before he has a soul.

Having a body is good. The soul experiences things through the body. It's through our eyes that we see, through our senses that we perceive what's going on around us. In the Old Testament, before God revealed more about eternity to His people, the poets wrote about Sheol, the land of the dead: a place of rest where the dead did nothing. Without a body, they couldn't!

For its size, the Bible tells us little about a disembodied life after death. Even in the book of Revelation with all its strange imagery, the souls of the righteous dead ask God, "When is the resurrection coming?" They long to have their new bodies. They are incomplete without them. We will not float through eternity; we will have bodies that are new and right and perfect. Because there's a link between the bodies we have and the bodies we will have, our bodies now are important. Resurrection is not disconnected from who we are now.

Beyond that, Christians know the body is important because Christians house God Himself in our bodies. Now that sounds weird at first, but that's exactly what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20. He says, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body."

Paul isn't saying we are God; absolutely not! But Christians are given the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, as our counselor, guide, and companion. He lives within us. We care for the body because it doesn't just belong to us; it belongs to God and is His home! Our bodies take the place of the ancient temple in Jerusalem. So it really matters how we treat it. Taking basic care of our bodies is important – so going to the doctor regularly, eating in a mindful manner, and exercising are ways we should steward God's gift of our bodies for the Holy Spirit.

At the same time, another truth comes into play: *God is sovereign and has ultimate control over our life and death. We don't*. Because of sin, we are frail and we die. Everyone knows this, but few people live as if it were a reality. That's why we heard from Psalm 39 this evening. The author is depressed; he feels as if he's been scourged by God; the wicked are prospering. In the midst of it, he surprises us. He takes comfort that man's lifespan is nothing, that man is a phantom, and each man's life is but a breath. Why does he focus on the frailty of life? One phrase: "my hope is in you." Though the wicked succeed for a time, they are dust just like he is. The difference is that the author has hope in God for this life and the next. God is sovereign. He rules over all things. His power has no boundaries. Even if we have perfect health, our life is a blink of an eye to God. Even if we are frail and face death, God is in control.

James, the brother of Jesus, reminds us of this. Some Christians were saying, “Hey, we’re going to travel here, spend a year there, work, make some money.” They said it without any thought to God’s plan for them. James says in chapter 4 of his letter, “Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.” As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil.”

If that isn’t clear enough, Jesus Himself speaks about trying to save your own life. Six times, Jesus says, “Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.” The world hasn’t changed. We’ve always been trying to find the secret to long life and good health. The only difference is, we’ve learned enough about science to be dangerous, to believe that science can save us. But God is clear – the only way to live eternally is to live for Him now, without regard for how long or how happy in worldly terms our earthly lives are. Our bodies are important; care for them is important because they are God’s temple and a gift to us. But we should be less concerned about living long lives as we are about living godly ones.

The real factor behind the health craze in our culture is fear. We fear the pain and frailty of disease, and we fear death because many believe that this life is all there is. If all we have is seventy or eighty years and that’s it, there’s nothing else, then extending life without pain is a really big deal. We fear that our kids are messed up health-wise because we’re afraid this world is all there is for them, too.

But God promises something far different. Over and over again, God tells us, “Do not fear. Just believe.” God will take care of us. God loves us. God wants us to be obsessed with Him, not ourselves. Our bodies matter and we should make good decisions about them, but not fret or worry about them. Paul says about the Holy Spirit, “You did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship.” As sons and daughters of the most high God, we can rejoice and not be afraid, even when we’ve made mistakes in how we care for ourselves. Our life and death are in His hands.

So let’s close this discussion with the practical side. How do we act responsibly towards our bodies as citizens of God’s Kingdom without making them our obsession as our culture has? I’ve got two biblical concepts for us to think about. *First, godly healthiness combines a thankful appreciation for everything with an eye to avoid addiction and overindulgence.*

How best do we act towards our health? Thankfulness. We are grateful to God for His incredibly blessings. We have a lot to be thankful for. An abundance of riches are available to us, not only in the foods we eat but the medical achievements from which we benefit. We grumble at the cost of groceries and of health care, but they are there and within affordable reach unthinkable even fifty years ago.

When Paul writes to his dear friend Timothy, he warns that some teachers will come forbidding marriage and certain foods. Those teachings are from demons, Paul says, continuing, “God created [these things] to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.”

When we are thankful about what we have, it changes our hearts. Our appreciation makes our attitudes better. And thankfulness keeps us from the two extremes – excluding everything and overindulging. In the first extreme, we ban things. We say we cannot have something, period. Paul spoke to that in Colossians. It leads to spiritual arrogance, but at the same time, it fuels our desires; it doesn't lessen them. If we ban something, we cannot be thankful to God for it. We just become proud about skipping it while we indulge our cravings some other way.

On the other extreme, overindulgence can't make us thankful either. Overindulgence means there is never enough for us. When we regularly overindulge, whether intentionally or not, we act as if God has not provided enough to fill us. Paul writes to the Corinthians, quoting a popular proverb, ““Everything is permissible for me"-- but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible for me"-- but I will not be mastered by anything.”

Overindulgence can lead to addiction. Proverbs 23:20-21 says, “Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat, for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags.” There are a lot of reasons for addiction, and we should treat everyone who deals with it with kindness and understanding. I have often fallen into that category when it comes to food. Addiction is something we must treat as a sickness that gains control of the body, helping those who battle it out of that pit.

As Christians, we watch out for those things that would damage the body and the temple of the Holy Spirit. Most of them damage us due to overindulgence. Some of us have allergies that make even small amounts of them dangerous to us. But the vast majority of the time, we simply need to stay in the thankfulness zone. Are we genuinely thankful for what we have received? Are we denying ourselves in such a way that we do not thank God? Are we indulging in such a way that we are never satisfied? If we can answer these questions honestly and well, we are likely to be in a faithful place with God.

Second thought: *as we pursue faithful healthiness and avoid harm as good stewards of our bodies, we shouldn't be judged or be judged regarding what we choose to eat or how we choose to exercise.* Paul wrote in our passage from Colossians, “Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” If we are finding joy and thankfulness for what we have in Jesus, then what others think of our choices is not ultimately important.

We may judge about eating carbs or artificial sweeteners, but the ancients judged on people eating pork and shellfish and meat sacrificed on some pagan god's altar. Some of these things were forbidden by the ancient Jewish ceremonial law, but because of Jesus' sacrifice for us, we can still approach God if we eat bacon or shrimp. Even meat sacrificed to idols was OK if you gave thanks to the one true God for it. We deal with it; they dealt with it too.

Jesus gets to the heart of it in Mark 7. Food doesn't make us unclean; food doesn't determine our status before God. What's really unclean are our actions and attitudes, the lusts and desires of our hearts, the evils that we think and sometimes do. Food can be wrong when we're satisfying a lust with it, when we live to eat. But health can also become our god, where we become more obsessed with it than the God who grants us good health.

Our own obsession with health leads us to judge others. We judge people not only if we're too heavy but if we're too thin, if our bodies aren't toned, if they have any failing, not knowing anything about how God made them or their metabolisms or why we can eat one cookie and they can't seem to stop eating them or why they can eat everything and we can't. But that judgment goes against Jesus' command to stop judging by external appearances.

It is hard not to judge people. We do it all the time. When I was at General Assembly, I was invited to a "thank-you party" for folks who are planting and rebirthing churches like we're trying to do. And it was a very hipster-y event. It was a catered event with bottles of wine flowing. We were out on the porch of this restaurant at 10 at night, so a few guys were having cigars. And my first thought was, "Boy, I really don't fit here. And what does it say for a bunch of young pastors to be smoking and drinking?"

But then I had to think about it again. I was chowing down on shish kabobs and these gorgonzola beef pizza crackers that were from heaven. There were brownies and cookies and suddenly my diet was out the window. Who was more moral – a guy who had half a cigar and a glass of wine, or the guy who had already eaten three square meals eating another couple thousand calories? I have to repent of my overindulgence! Do I think smoking is good for you? No! But I'd spent a total of an hour with this crowd. Could I judge their way of life and their love for Jesus and their ministries because they had a cigar? How dare I!

In the same way, let's be generous in our assessments of those around us. Let's focus less on individual behaviors that might not be great for us but are not directly sinful and let's focus more on becoming more Christ-like, both as individuals and as the church together in fellowship. Let's encourage one another to exercise without judgment of those who can't or don't. Let's invite one another to eat in ways that build up God's temple without passing judgment on having a brownie or two. If a friend has asked to be accountable to us about eating habits or patterns, then great – help in that way faithfully. But let's not set ourselves up as judges who condemn one another.

God has given us our bodies, and they are good. We are accountable for them. He's also given us the ability to enjoy many good things He has given us. Let us truly be thankful for them, avoiding extremes. And in all things, friends, let us remember that Christ is the center of our lives. With Scripture, we agree: "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."