

## **Biblical Attitudes Toward the Body**

Ask twenty different people what adds to the 'spice of life' for them, and you are likely to receive twenty different answers. I'd like to throw my answer into the ring- different perspectives. Unusual perhaps, but can you imagine what life would be like, if we all had the same perspective? I'll admit there are times when I prefer watching a sporting event with fans who agree with my perspective, but most of the time I find different perspectives stimulating. But that does not mean that our perspectives are unimportant or inconsequential. They influence our actions and often form our worldview, which means they must be guarded carefully. When we cling to dangerous or unhealthy perspectives, we're headed for trouble. I've seen this happen in the area of body image when we look to the wrong sources for information about our bodies. Of course it doesn't help that there are billion dollar industries that exist exclusively to influence our body perspectives.

Needless to say, the images portrayed by the media and the impossible standards they have established for the ideal body have had the desired impact. Body dissatisfaction is at an all-time high in our country. A case in point- if the most recent Barbie doll were the height of an actual woman, she would have a 16-inch waist. Likewise, if the latest GI Joe Extreme were full-sized, he would have a 55 inch chest and a 27 inch bicep. Obviously, if those are your standards, prepare to be disappointed. At Messiah, we're not exempt from this influence. The recent National College Health Assessment report for Messiah College suggests that body dissatisfaction is alive and well on campus. According to BMI estimates, 27% of females at Messiah are overweight- a number consistent with national averages. But reality does not always influence perception. The same report found that 36% of females on campus consider themselves overweight, and 54% of our females are trying to lose weight. When students who do not consider themselves overweight are trying to lose weight it's time for a new body image perspective. I suggest we return to the One who created them. God's word is not silent about our bodies and it gives us the framework for a perspective that glorifies him.

That framework begins by remembering that our value to God is never based on our body or our appearance. We are valued by God because He created us in His image. We are used by God as we change our heart not our appearance, and as we surrender our will, not desserts. Dwight L. Moody was about 5'7" and 280 pounds. It is suggested that his ministry was responsible for the conversion of approximately 1 million people.

Our bodies are one of God's most amazing creative acts. Why so many Christians fail to recognize that is a mystery to me. I agree with St. Augustine, who marveled that so many of us can wonder at all the amazing things we see in nature, yet pass by ourselves without ever wondering. Scripture teaches that we are God's workmanship, and as such, we are surely one of his great masterpieces. But unlike most masterpieces, this one continually adapts to our daily decisions. Therefore, what we do to them and with them matters to God. In the areas of hygiene, sleep, exercise, nutrition, drug use, and sexual behavior, God's creation insinuates responsibility. Throughout scripture, caring for one's body is presented as both natural and expected. Jesus used love for one's self as a model for how we ought to love others. In Ephesians, Paul uses the model to discuss how husbands are to love their wives, and adds, "after all, no one ever hated his own body". Unfortunately, in modern society the antithesis is too often true. Everyone seems to hate their body today.

Of course in a society that focuses so much on the physical, sometimes our enthusiasm for caring for the body can lead to obsession if we're not careful. When that happens, we often sacrifice health for appearance, and our emphasis moves from sanctifying to sculpting. Even after forty days in the wilderness, and intense starvation, Jesus refused to let himself be mastered by physical desires. According to Paul, when we live as though our stomach is our god, we become enemies of the cross of Christ, because the flesh has once again trumped the spirit. Our culture constantly encourages us to express *ourselves* through our bodies, often by building muscle and losing fat. But God calls us to express *His spirit* through our attitudes and actions.

Ultimately, chasing after society's ideal appearance is an unsatisfying pursuit- exerting lots of effort on a treadmill that never seems to get us anywhere. Emotional well-being diminishes as daily life becomes a continual journey of assessment, with mirrors, clothing, tape measures,

photographs, and scales as the ever-present tools. A preoccupation with our appearance (either the one we have or the one we want) also comes with another repercussion- we begin judging others by *their* appearance...hardly a Christ-like attitude.

A Biblical body image requires that we adjust our eyesight. Problems occur when we focus on the wrong things. In II Corinthians Paul encourages us to fix our eyes on what is unseen, and later in Hebrews, to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. Although we were once born into a physical world, we have been reborn into a spiritual one. The transformation process includes our eyesight. No wonder Paul prayed that the eyes of our heart would be enlightened.

Finally, a Biblical body image recognizes that God uses our genetic limitations and imperfections for his glory. The image of God within us is encased in jars of clay for a reason. They enable God to reveal his power in us, and enable others to see Christ through us. Perfect physical specimens often draw attention to themselves- as Christians we are intended to reflect Christ. Our physical deficiencies often make that easier to do. Philosophy professor and theologian Dallas Willard, in his book, *Renovation of the Heart*, suggests that the body lies right at the center of our spiritual life, and is often the primary barrier to us being conformed to Christ-likeness. Perhaps that's true because the time, effort, money, and energy we direct toward our physical bodies forces us to ask the probing question, "What are the true priorities of my life?"

Moving from cultural expectations toward Biblical perspectives of the human body requires that we acknowledge both the significance and the insignificance of the body. At the very least, three attitudes or actions will emerge with this new perspective:

- we will appropriately care for the body, and avoid intentionally harming it, because God created it and uses it for His purpose;
- we will refuse to be mastered by it, or become obsessed with it, which diminishes the reality of the spirit-world we've been reborn into; and
- we will accept the imperfections and limitations of our body, and allow them to reveal God's spirit through us.

This new perspective allows our bodies to become holy, living sacrifices that please God. No longer objects to be glorified, they become vehicles through which the Creator is glorified. There is no better body image than that.