



*A Ministry of the  
Church of God (Seventh Day)*

# Maintaining Spiritual Health



*A Five-Part Study*



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## I. Introduction

A gifted Christian, age 93, spends most of her time in bed in a convalescent home. A misstep resulted in a broken foot. She insists that she will never walk again. Prior to her accident, she enjoyed excellent health and above-average intelligence. She drove her own car, cooked, read extensively, and socialized with abilities and alertness that seemed to defy the aging process.

The fractured bone mended within six months and can now support this woman. But her fear of pain not only keeps her from trying to walk on the foot but also threatens her long-term survival.

This senior adult's story illustrates that to retain usefulness, bodies must remain active. Their ability to perform diminishes through inactivity. The last chapter of Ecclesiastes describes poetically the inevitable diminishing of human capacities, and urges a call for God's help early in life:

Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come (12:1).

In other words, in order to stay active, we must make correct choices while we are physically adept.

The connection between physical and spiritual fitness is strong, and should be grasped early in life. The greeting of John's letter to his "dear friend Gaius" (3 John 1, 2) underscores this link:

Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.

John wishes for Gaius a good and prosperous journey through life, both physically and spiritually.

### **Physical vs. spiritual fitness**

When we understand that physical and spiritual fitness complement each other, we can make appropriate comparisons.

Physical fitness implies a state of readiness. We are prepared to meet demands made on our bodies, be they strenuous labor, climbing, recovering from illness, or participating in rigorous sports. In the same way, spiritual fitness requires readiness. Encouragement builds up and maintains spiritual vigor in the body of Christ, improving relationships — how we relate to God and

His family. So the closer and warmer we feel toward God and the brotherhood, the better our spiritual health.

No program to improve fitness can succeed without a person's determination to alter their lifestyle. Minor changes to avoid inconvenience or disruption stifle the resolve to improve health. Adopting better health practices requires a person to make major adjustments in attitudes, routines, and disciplines. They must exert willpower to improve fitness physically and spiritually.

## Getting started

Spiritual vitality becomes a concern after a spiritual birth, which Jesus described as a birth of the water and Spirit (John 3:5). Peter preached convincingly that Jesus was the Messiah: crucified, buried, resurrected, and ascended into heaven. After listening to him, many of Peter's listeners were strongly affected and asked, "What shall we do?"

"Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you'" (Acts 2:38).

*Repent* is coupled with *baptized* in a manner descriptive of birth by Spirit and water. Repentance implies a turning. It begins when a person regrets their sins, and it enlightens the past and future. Repentance unloads burdens and brings inner peace. As a result, God rewards the remorseful with membership in His family and establishes a relationship with them. Baptism offers public acknowledgement of this new bonding with God — this nativity of the Spirit.

We can see an illustration of true repentance in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). The son's unusual demand for his undeserved inheritance put undue economic and emotional stress on a household that had served him well. Squandering his inheritance, the son plummeted into obscene living conditions in a sty. He fed pigs and wished his own diet were as nourishing. We can imagine how often the son regretted demanding and wasting his inheritance.

Realizing that his circumstances were deplorable was not enough to initiate the son's recovery. He resolved to "set out and go back," but not until he *began moving* toward his father did hope replace despair. The son did what the spiritually fit must do: put into action his intention to do better. Spiritual fitness requires "walking the talk."

## Reading the Bible

“You are what you eat,” many declare. The statement makes the valid observation that our health is impacted not just by our level of activity, but by what we consume.

The same is true of our spiritual health. Spiritual enhancement comes from practicing good discipline, seeking wholesome sources of enjoyment, forgoing corrupting allurements, and carefully regulating ourselves. We develop spiritually through what we experience, whether religious or secular.

A superior source of spiritual nourishment is the Bible. It offers the purest revelation of the will of God. Though the novice can understand the Bible, especially if they read a newer version,\* it remains a challenging quest even to the most accomplished Bible scholar. The Bible can be largely understood but never fully comprehended. A good appetite for it comes from a healthy curiosity about its contents and meaning.

The Bible informs us that “faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17, NASB). After hearing, a further step is needed:

Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character . . . for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true (Acts 17:11).

This attitude was exemplary, because the Bereans accepted responsibility to make sure that the Bible was presented accurately. Truth that is stretched is no truth at all. We do not change God’s message; it changes us. No other document expresses the divine will as precisely as does the Bible, and we need to understand it in order to obey God rather than men.

## Outside sources

We also gain spiritual nourishment by listening carefully when the Scriptures are read, explained, and discussed. Pastors and Bible teachers who have an obvious love for the Word offer excellent opportunities to learn. Group discussions also provide spiritual nourishment because those who attend present a variety of ideas and reflections. One is never too familiar with the text to ask

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\* Newer Bible versions include the *New King James Version* (NKJV), *New International Version* (NIV), *New American Standard Bible* (NASB), and *English Standard Version* (ESV).

questions, because nothing enhances learning as does a hearty curiosity.

No other book has had so much commentary written about its existence and contents as the Bible. Almost every library and bookstore, especially online, has a religious section, some appreciably large. As a person develops spiritual strength, writings about the Bible and its contents offer valuable insight, even though they must be read critically. Any aid to a greater and more accurate understanding of God's Word supplies spiritually healthy intake.

### **Questions for review and discussion**

1. What does it mean to be physically fit?
2. Spirituality is mostly a concern about (*choose one*)
  - a. focus
  - b. emotions
  - c. relationships
  - d. cooperation
  - e. sincerity
3. A fitness regimen demands adjustment in
  - a. attitude
  - b. routine
  - c. discipline
  - d. all of the above
4. What does repentance involve?
5. From what source do we get the purest revelation of God?
6. What made the Bereans more noble?
7. What special trait enhances learning?

Answers are on page 20.



## II. Exercise

A serious fitness program includes exercise. Activity, some of it strenuous, keeps bodies ready for extraordinary physical demands.

On the outskirts of a Mexican village is a trail that escalates hundreds of feet up a mountainside to a small Indian pyramid. At its beginning the trail is wide to provide easy hiking, then gradually narrows. Steps are later replaced by stepping stones, closely positioned at first, but soon requiring small hops from one to the next. Eventually, ladders take climbers through vertical tunnels. Climbers are dressed in hiking gear with backpacks, but these are rare in comparison to many who ascend wearing street clothes: ladies in medium high heels, parents carrying children too small to walk, and others who hardly seem prepared for a climb that requires at least an hour for experienced hikers.

It matters little how the climbers are outfitted, nor whether the burden they carry seems manageable. Success in reaching the top depends on determination and fitness. Most climbers reach the top, but all along the trail are those who acknowledge they can climb no higher. They are wise to stop, because for the unfit, the highest one-third of the trail can be life threatening. The climbers are an ongoing reminder of how important it is to remain fit.

In the same way, the Bible constantly urges us that after we learn what to do in our spiritual lives, we should do it. Jesus, Paul, and John confirm this:

“Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Matthew 7:24).

For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10).

Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth (1 John 3:18).

Putting good intentions into practice can be as challenging as climbing a mountain. It requires good conditioning.

Often church members attend a weekly service out of a sense of duty, looking forward to pleasant visiting afterward, a good dinner at home, a nap, and some evening diversion — all of which prepares them for another week of spiritual inactivity. Were they interested, the learning and inspiration from Bible class and worship could have energized and strengthened them spiritually, but

their lack of interest and concern leave them listless. A sudden spiritual crisis may find them unprepared and vulnerable.

## Religious activities

In his book *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, respected philosopher-theologian C. S. Lewis wrote, "I can well understand how a man who is trying to love God and his neighbour should come to dislike the very word *religion*."

A non-intrusive religion frequently becomes a substitute for developing a dynamic relationship with a personal God. For example, a paper by an anonymous author declares that nothing is more important than teaching children to use the sign of the cross. How important many of our religious habits and rituals have become! Many "believers" who offer minimal efforts through religious rituals are spiritually flabby.

To be religious without a personal bond with God is like reading recipes without ever cooking, or being an accountant with no thought given to profit. It is devotion to the *means* to an end. It is learning how to exercise without doing so. Religious activities without a spiritual relationship are essentially secular.

## Specific spiritual exercises

Matthew 25 contains three parables that give criteria for judgment. The first is the parable of ten virgins. Its message is general: A Christian must always be spiritually fit, the same as being ready. The second parable (the talents) encourages Christians to use the abilities God gave them. This means leaving our comfort zone and putting ourselves at risk. The third parable about a division of sheep and goats further defines the two previous parables. After the livestock are separated, the King explains why He put the sheep on His right and goats on His left.

To those on His right He says:

"Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me" (vv. 34-36).

Those rewarded cannot remember the occasions when these

benefits were given to the King. But He answers, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (v. 40).

More affluent societies have developed welfare systems by which the poor and disadvantaged are supported through taxation. The grudging taxpayers experience no joy in giving. Those receiving assistance from a faceless agency feel little gratitude, and the politician who helped arrange the redistribution hopes he will gain favorable attention. Philanthropy is managed through dedicated foundations. Requests for funds from private sources are scrutinized for their legitimacy before donations are distributed.

A Christian executive from such a culture was assigned temporarily to live where there was no welfare system. He was disturbed to see many beggars. They walked the streets, sat on sidewalks, moved through crowds, and begged from tourists. Beggars were so abundant, there was no way to escape them.

When the executive noticed that residents were undisturbed and often gave to the beggars, he began wondering whether ignoring the pleas from the poor was Christlike. Feeling guilt, he placed small coins into paper cups, plastic dishes, hats, and begging hands. With each donation of a pittance, he grew more satisfied. Gradually, larger coins found their way to the beggars.

One day while the executive browsed in a marketplace, an elderly man limped toward the businessman. He had lost one eye and didn't see well with the other. In his hand was a small plastic bowl. The businessman reached into his pocket for a coin and found none, so he went to his wallet for a larger amount. Stunned, the beggar feebly said, "Thank you. God bless you."

The beggar's gratitude reminded the businessman that to give to the least of Jesus' brethren was the same as giving to our Lord. In that context, the man concluded that his contribution was not so sizable after all.

Many religious people never have contact with Jesus' brotherhood of the disadvantaged. Seldom do they feed, give drink, accept the needy stranger, offer clothing, accept the responsibility to encourage healing, and spend time with those banished from society. Giving these valuable gifts is spiritual exercise. It keeps us ready — spiritually fit.

## **Exercising the fruit of the Spirit**

Descriptions of spiritual exercise are also in Galatians. The fruit of the Spirit, listed in chapter 5, identifies spiritual drills that develop proficiency in our life of faith. To be a good runner, one must devote more time and energy to running and less to lifting weights. Whatever benefits a sprinter can get from other activities, they can never run at their best unless they focus mostly on running.

The fruit of the Spirit operates similarly. If a person wishes to experience joy, they must practice being joyful. A person learns to love by loving others. Those seeking to be more patient must practice patience. When Paul offers this list (Galatians 5:22, 23), he issues a challenge to learn and master behavior demonstrating these virtues by subjecting all of life's circumstances, and our feelings about them, to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. This is spiritual training that develops increasingly nourishing spiritual fruit.

## **Questions for review and discussion**

1. How may we characterize religious activities that lack a relationship with God?
2. What is the subject addressed by the three parables in Matthew 25?
3. From the third parable in Matthew 25, which ones belong to Jesus' brotherhood?
4. Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit is a challenge to what?

Answers are on page 20.

### III. Unity

#### Two metaphors

Part of spiritual conditioning is contributing to the health of the body of Christ. Two metaphors in Ephesians illustrate this practice. The first is a building. Paul discusses the need to receive into our fellowship believers from significantly different backgrounds. He reminds the Ephesians that they are united through Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Such a gift of grace must result in more than tolerance; it must result in full acceptance of others. There should be no "foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household." His ideal is that "In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord" (Ephesians 2:21).

Peter's first general letter uses the same verbal picture: "you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house . . ." (1 Peter 2:5).

Walking across his basement floor, a homeowner slipped and almost fell. He noticed a small puddle of water behind him, then an additional drop of water join the accumulation. In the ceiling was a sizable wet area that had obviously been soaked for a while, due to a leaking pipe above the basement. Alarmed, the man called professionals to fix the leak and refinish the ceiling. Everything had to be restored. Failure to do so would result in more costly damage.

Likewise, a "holy temple rising to the Lord" does not honor Him if damaged parts of His building are neglected.

The second metaphor is in Ephesians 4:16, where the community of believers is described as a human body: "From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."

In his insightful book *Where is God When It Hurts?* Philip Yancey describes Dr. Paul Brand's work among lepers. His experience with this dreaded disease debunks centuries of misconceptions. The most prominent is that leprosy is caused by bacteria that create ulcers and result in decaying tissue that falls from the hands and feet. Yancey notes that leprosy is indeed cruel, but not in the way many have thought. It acts like an anesthetic, numbing the pain cells in hands, feet, nose, ears, and eyes. The inability to feel pain denies victims the ability to protect themselves. Lepers have been

seen reaching into hot coals to retrieve food that was accidentally dropped into the fire. A leper's blood ran down the handle of a shovel because a protruding nail was piercing his hand repeatedly. There was no pain to signal a warning.

Yancey and Dr. Brand call pain "the gift nobody wants," but the body experiences it anyway. A person may wish to be rid of pain, but doing so could result in disaster. Similarly, the body of Christ cannot enjoy good health when it is numb to the pain that should warn that one or more of its members is suffering. All body parts should work together.

## **Forgiveness**

It is a biblical postulate that the grace of God can never be earned, but Jesus suggests an exception in His model prayer:

"Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. . . . For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matthew 6:12, 14, 15).

God forgives us after we have forgiven others. Forgiving is strenuous work, but we must do it before we can receive God's mercy, be spiritually fit, and keep unity among believers. Forgiveness never ends for the Christian. They must pardon not only friends with their slight offenses but also those who deeply hurt them.

## **Additional forms of spiritual exercise**

Numerous other kinds of exercise are needed for spiritual vitality. Our limited commentary here by no means suggests they are less important. For example, the Ten Commandments — all of them — are basic to vigorous spiritual living. If we ignore them, we will stumble in our walk with God.

Jesus' sermons in the Gospels set forth many divine mandates we must obey. Also, giving consistently and cheerfully of our time, energy, and possessions are basic Christian obligations that maintain spiritual health. Anyone concerned about spiritual well-being will find health-enhancing instructions in most Bible passages.

## Questions for review and discussion

1. Going beyond tolerance means (*choose one*)
  - a. offering warmer greetings
  - b. extending full acceptance
  - c. offering intercessory prayer
  - d. conceding God loves everyone
  
2. Describe Dr. Paul Brand's discovery of the symptoms of leprosy.
  
3. How does God react to those who cannot forgive?

Answers are on page 20.

## IV. Prayer

Not much physical exercise is done on the knees, but a substantial amount of spiritual exercise is. A person improves their spiritual health by committing to pray regularly.

Volumes have been written about the theology, philosophy, practicality, postures, and purpose of prayer. Some claim to believe in it fervently, but seldom pray. Others confess that they are not people of faith, denying a belief in God, but they occasionally find themselves in a crisis that makes them pray in desperation. Prayer is how we communicate with our Maker.

Praying strengthens our relationship with God. When a person calls to inquire about a friend's well-being, to offer gratitude, to extend congratulations, or to provide helpful information, it strengthens a personal bond. Extended silence and disinterest weaken personal ties.

It is difficult to know how many events in a praying person's life are the direct result of prayer and how many God would have brought about anyway. We do not instruct God in prayer. Rather, we place our trust in Him and recognize His will in what happens.

### God's omnipresence

When there is no communication with God, it is not because He is silent and involved elsewhere, but because we are quiet and inattentive. We never need to wonder whether He is available. God is omnipresent not just in an abstract sense, but in what we see around us. We see His handiwork in humanity, nature, weather, health, daily survival, and the plethora of good that makes up our lives. This broader view of God's presence inspires us to maintain harmony with Him. Often we recite a prayer, listing ways in which He might treat us graciously. Such a list, however, may distort the relationship, suggesting that God should serve us instead of us serving Him.

When Moses saw a burning bush, he was drawn to it and found God there. How intriguing that he could readily accept the presence of God in that unusual setting! The conversation that took place there forever changed the course of human history.



## Conflicting realities

Besides strengthening our relationship with God, prayer also helps us recognize our weaknesses. Humans usually ignore, rationalize, or legitimize their sins. But a person who regularly prays knows that while they can ignore God, they cannot hide from Him. Confession does not impress God with the gravity of sins a person committed; rather, it enables the confessor to learn about themselves. A person doesn't appreciate the boundless grace of God when they have never discovered their need for it. Those who openly discuss their shortcomings with God experience His grace and power to overcome.

## Expectations from prayer

Is it right to expect miracles in response to prayer? The answer is the subject of ongoing, sincere, soul-searching conversation among believers. Jesus assured:

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened” (Matthew 7:7, 8).

Jesus' disciples could not drive out a demon when they prayed over a sick boy. “Why couldn't we drive him out?” they asked Jesus (17:19). He replied:

“Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you” (v. 20).

Jesus' reference to faith the size of a mustard seed has led to the unanswerable question “How do we quantify faith?” If we pray that a mountain be removed and it remains, is our faith smaller than a mustard seed? If so, how can our faith increase, improving our spiritual health?

A respectable answer suggests that Jesus' reference to the size of faith has less to do with quantity of faith than with exercise of it. The power Jesus spoke of is available to people who live by faith, who have ongoing, disciplined trust in God. They trust in Him to answer according to His will, even if that is different from their request.

## Questions for review and discussion

1. A primary purpose of prayer is to (*choose one*)
  - a. strengthen a relationship
  - b. help a church congregation focus on a need
  - c. present to God a list of ways He might help us
  - d. get God's attention
  - e. describe our troubles to God and suggest solutions
  
2. Confession in prayer is an excellent way to (*choose one*)
  - a. learn humility
  - b. clean up and restore our conscience
  - c. impress God with the gravity of our sins
  - d. learn about ourselves
  - e. all of the above
  
3. Faith the size of a mustard seed has less to do with quantity than with \_\_\_\_\_.

Answers are on page 20.

## V. Mental Toughness

The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.

— John Milton (1608-1674)

Those who have had little exposure to religious conversation or preaching will be curious when they note how often *heart* is mentioned. They may wonder whether the speakers are cardiologists! They will learn quickly that references to the heart indicate concern about the believer's spiritual fitness. Christians want to experience a benediction Jesus offered: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8).

How can the heart be purified?

Danish theologian-philosopher Soren Kierkegaard writes with powerful idealism in his book *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*. The title connects the condition of the heart to the will. What we want determines our attitude, and this, in turn, describes the condition of our hearts.

In most biblical usages, *heart* refers to all that is inside a person — specifically, human passion. Passion often seeks its own direction and path, and concerns itself with the moment. It has a big appetite, limited discretion, and little memory. Passion is clever in serving a deluded master, gradually seeking greater things until its master serves it like a blind and ignorant slave. Millions refuse to control their passions and are now enslaved by self-destructive lifestyles and habits they are helpless to escape. With help from God, only mental sturdiness can correct and protect us from abuses caused by undisciplined passion.

Whether or not any of us remains physically and spiritually fit depends on our mental toughness. Paul underscores this in his call to present our bodies a living sacrifice that is holy and pleasing to God. To do so, we must be transformed to a new kind of thinking that enables us to test and prove God's will (Romans 12:1, 2).

Paul writes specifically about the connection between heart and mind in Colossians 3:1, 2:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

## Benefits

A conversation took place among three ministers, all having problems with mice in their church basements. The first reported, "We set traps, put out poison, tried noise, among other things, but failed to get rid of them."

The second pastor added, "We tried all of that without success. We finally called in an exterminator, but the mice are back. We don't know if we'll ever keep them out."

The third pastor spoke more triumphantly. "I had a team of men catch the mice. I baptized the mice, gave them a church membership, and I haven't seen them since."

This absurd little story satirizes a religious phenomenon: the inactivity among so many who see value in a life of faith, but don't put forth enough to develop and strengthen it.

Keeping physically fit has its rewards: energy, reduced vulnerability to sickness and accident, better maneuverability, enhanced relationships, raised spirits, and sound sleep. Better health improves almost everything else.

Similarly, successful godly living is enhanced by wholesome spiritual activity. It establishes a relationship with God and assures we are part of eternity. It increases our appetite for what is good and gives eternal purpose to our existence. It makes and keeps us ready for spiritual attack from the Enemy. All effort put into spiritual fitness is enhancing; nothing is wasted. Let the wise get started and stay active!

## Questions for review and discussion

1. The symbol of the heart refers to (*choose one*)
  - a. a person's capacity to love
  - b. our intelligence, a godly wisdom
  - c. our emotions, apart from thought processes
  - d. morality, faithful obedience to God's laws
  - e. pity
  - f. our passions — all that is inside us

2. Why is it necessary to be mentally tough?
3. What is required in order to test and prove God's will?
4. What are the advantages to
  - a. physical fitness?
  - b. spiritual fitness?

Answers are on page 20.

## Answers

- I. Introduction:** 1. To be ready; 2. c.; 3. d.; 4. A turning, regret, remorse, a new and enlightened view of the past and present; 5. The Bible; 6. The Bereans searched the Scriptures to see if what they had been told was true; 7. A healthy curiosity.
- II. Exercise:** 1. Secular; 2. Judgment; 3. The hungry, thirsty, homeless, those needing clothing, sick, imprisoned. 4. To learn and master behavior demonstrating these virtues.
- III. Unity:** 1. b; 2. No sensation of pain; 3. God doesn't forgive the unforgiving.
- IV. Prayer:** 1. a; 2. d; 3. Exercise.
- V. Mental Toughness:** 1. f; 2. Undisciplined passions mislead and enslave; 3. A transformation of the mind; a new way of thinking; 4. See the last two paragraphs of Benefits.