

Almost the Perfect Analogy

As the old sayings go: "Seeing is believing" and "A picture is worth a thousand words." Very true. But how, then, can we get clear insight of into invisible, spiritual, matters? The best way, I know, is through an appropriate physical analogy.

Much spiritually can be learned by observing physical truths and realities, and vice versa. It is often easier to see and understand indirectly, through analogy, than directly. Our physical life offers a great opportunity (if taken) to grasp spiritual truths. We often know more than we think we do if we simply apply knowledge of one truth to another, less understood, realm of life. In fact, this ability to relate from area to area is the chief tool/aspect of wisdom.

Some say there is no connection between the physical and spiritual, but even a nominal reflection will reveal striking similarities, and an opportunity to learn about one from the other. Not only are the physical and spiritual NOT enemies, there should be (and will be when properly pursued) synergy between them.

"15 minutes, 3 times a week and in 6 weeks you will have the body you have always dreamed of!" (Bowflex commercial) Anyone who believes this deserves to be cheated! The same is true of those who believe in spiritual voodoo (great results with little or no time or effort).

Physical and spiritual strength (the benefits, how to enhance or undercut, etc.) are ALMOST perfectly analogous.

First, in both cases, we usually deceive ourselves as to how strong we are; only when we begin (and, more importantly, strive to continue to the development of a discipline) do we find we can't just jump in and do as much as we want -- there are real limitations to our abilities. Second, the challenge (spiritually and physically) increases with age and, third, exercise is the only way to get some "junk" out of our lives.

Being (and getting) physically OR spiritually fit is largely the result of four factors:

- ⇒ The level of our sacrifice.
- ⇒ Why/How we exercise (exercise is the process of turning what we eat into muscle -- in the spiritual, the process of applying our intake to develop spiritual strength and stamina).
- ⇒ What we eat.
- ⇒ Our "season" of life.

There are right/wrong, better/worse ways to accomplish the objective of physical (and spiritual) growth, but the good news is that good results flow from less than perfect effort. Yet one thing is for sure, simple good intentions are no more effective in the spiritual than in the physical.

What must we do to increase our strength and stamina and what must we do to minimize the natural deterioration? The following are some suggestions:

The level of our sacrifice

- ⇒ "No pain. No gain." is not a true statement, but "No time. No gain." is! Most people would be happy to spiritually and physically exercise IF it did not cost them any of their precious time (if this were possible, they would then, later, learn there are other obstacles to a successful exercise strategy).

It is much like the reason for not spending time with other important responsibilities (being with their children, spouses, parents, etc.) – even if they don't say or admit it, the cost is

greater than the benefit.

The greatest "cost" we need to count, before we begin an exercise program, is there will be a real time price involved – but who, already, does not waste a great deal of time? One of the key differences between the successful and unsuccessful is that successful people are better able to analyze and replace the less important with the more important.

- ⇒ Understand 90% of physical training is mental, not physical, just as 90% of spiritual development is mental, not spiritual. Dabbling with a new physical or spiritual "routine" is easy -- when we try to develop a discipline the mental challenges and tests come! Boredom, questioning as to progress, doubts about the value, loss of focus, etc. Continually heeding the mental challenges is required for long-term progress.
- ⇒ Effect of trials? Either giving up or working through to the "next level" is key. Everyone sins - - the spiritually successful are those who repent, do so quickly and return to what they know builds them up rather than continuing what destroys and tears them down. Neither the physical nor spiritual roads are straight -- around every corner is the possibility of falling and quitting or the potential of, when this happens, returning to the "golden" path. One option we do not have is sitting down -- we are on a moving sidewalk.

Why/How we exercise

- ⇒ Recognize that the heart is the most important organ/muscle both spiritually and physically. Few who focus on the benefits of "looks" are successful in developing a long-term exercise program -- either the price to develop and maintain the desired appearance is too high or after getting to a certain level, people tend to feel like they "have made it" and then slack off. The REAL benefit of a physical OR spiritual exercise discipline is in strengthening the heart, not in showing off to others!
- ⇒ Have a plan! "Working out" on an ad hoc basis requires several times as much mental and physical effort as a simple plan. Whether it is so many minutes a day, so many sit-ups, chapters or other measurable criteria -- develop and complete a plan. An open-ended, erratic and irregular approach does not work long-term because, instead of developing a discipline to finish a specific task each time, the focus is always on "how I feel." And you can be sure you will begin to resent the effort since you seldom will get a sense of accomplishment from what you have done; if you do not have a plan, you will only be discouraged that you have not (or should have) done more! This is a mental trap that leads to sure failure.
- ⇒ Don't fall for the latest (physical or spiritual) diet fad! At best, the result will be a skinny unhealthy person! The analogous spiritual person is the legalist -- trying to become something by not doing something. It doesn't work either spiritually or physically! The deceiving thing about dieting is that there may be some quick illusions of success -- but they will not last! Proper exercise will result in a change of appetite so that a consequence will be weight loss (loss of spiritual or physical "fat"). But when weight loss, rather than better health (a stronger heart), is the focus FEW are even ostensibly successful -- they go from "bad to worse."
- ⇒ Don't wait to begin until everything is in-place -- the right equipment, the right clothes, instructors, methods, perfect church . . . it will NEVER happen! "The one faithful with little . . ." is the one who will be blessed with good results.
- ⇒ At the other extreme, there are those always pressing to the point of exhaustion until they finally get sick of the effort and give up; progress, physically and spiritually, is slow and must be accomplished methodically. Think "Tortoise and the Hare."
- ⇒ "Super" Saints -- these are the spiritual monks and the gym "rats" that spend all their time in holy contemplation or in the gym building a grotesque physique. These people need to live a more moderate and "real" life so they, in fact, have a life.
- ⇒ Another error is looking at your natural "build" and either (because you are naturally better than others) feel no effort is needed or (because naturally deficient) feel there is no hope -- both are equally wrong and foolish.

Surprisingly, the cost and time difference between "maintenance" and "enhancement" is usually very

small – while the benefits are great; targeting for and expecting improvement and enhancement (rather than just trying to “tread water”) will help keep you mentally fresh. Think improvement and progress.

What we eat

- ⇒ Eating well without exercise or exercise without eating well will provide only a fraction of what both, working together, will accomplish. Reading your Bible (eating well) without going to church, “assembling” with other believers, etc. (exercising) will result in little success and will eventually become difficult or impossible to maintain.
- ⇒ Expecting “pills” to solve all our problems -- doctors and medicine can be very helpful, but they can never replace our health efforts. With proper disciplines they can be invaluable, but without the right effort on our part, any help is short-term and minimally effective.
- ⇒ Using steroids (artificial and risky methods) to intensify “bulk,” is dangerous and foolish! “Doing to be seen;” wanting to make an appearance without the commensurate effort will not provide long-term benefits.

Our “season” of life

- ⇒ Special grace is given in youth that is not extended to adults. Everyone (if they reach a certain level of maturity) will see the need of making the effort to physically (and spiritually) take care of themselves, yet few will develop the disciplines to mitigate the effects of aging.
- ⇒ As mentioned above, before we make an effort at something new, we usually deceive ourselves as to how strong we are; when we begin we find we can't just jump in and do as much as we want -- there are real limitations to our abilities. But the good news is that success is measured by the development of a discipline, not in how strong we currently are. Strength growth is a function of repetition, not initial or even current strength!
The person with little physical or spiritual strength will benefit more from 15 minutes a day than a really strong person will from their 1 hour a day, ASSUMING they continue to the point of developing a discipline. If they give up, the stronger person will continue to get stronger while they decline.

Expert are now finding it is never too late to benefit from eating well and exercising

If a person, as a result of eating better and exercising, does not begin to feel better, something is wrong with what they are doing. Both physically and spiritually, we decline if we do not advance. Again, youth “covers a multitude of sins” that, with age, will overwhelm and overpower a person unless they face and attack them.

The foundation and catalyst for achieving anything physically or spiritually? Discipline – Time discipline!

As good as an analogy is, at some point it usually loses its parallelism. In the case of food and exercise related to the physical and spiritual, they are similar in most respects, while exactly the opposite at one key point – the best of food and exercise only have a temporal effect on the physical while for the spiritual the impact is eternal. Paul highlights this by reminding us:

Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance ^{1 Timothy 4:7-9}