

Body Matters

A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE BODY
AND WHY IT MATTERS IN AN AGE OF DISCONTENT

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ZER

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Body Matters

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THE BODY MATTERS

Fat. Saggy. Dissatisfied. Frumpy. Mediocre. Ugly. Dumpy. Disgusted. Tired. Aging. Blah. Plump. Frustrated. Coping. Trapped. It is what it is. Discouraged.

As a woman, it's not difficult to look at this list of words and figure out what they are describing. In fact, we have probably even used a few of these same words ourselves. A couple of years ago, we surveyed three hundred women from our church about their bodies, and these are the real words they chose to describe them. My personal favorite is the woman who described her body as *lush*. I can almost picture it.

I've had my own issues with my body since I was a teenager, and I knew I wasn't alone. But seeing those surveys made the issue that much more real to me. My heart sunk as I thought about these women whom the Lord loves with an everlasting love, those whom he fashioned intimately within their mothers' wombs. Through reading those surveys, my eyes were opened to the depth of brokenness,

despair, frustration, and bondage so many women are in when it comes to their own bodies.

More than ninety-five percent of the responses were negative, even dismal. And the remaining five percent weren't much better: patient, tolerant, optimistic, a work in progress, hopeful. Even these responses hint at the underlying *dis*-ease present within many women. Less than one percent of respondents actually gave a positive response. When asked what part of their body they dislike the most, everything from head to toe was covered: hair, eyes, complexion, teeth, smile, ears, nose, neck, cuticles, arms, hips, legs, feet, height, weight, wrinkles, thighs, ankles, and stomach. Seventy-eight percent confessed that they feel more confident when they feel attractive. Sixty-two percent believed that they would be happier if they were thinner. Ninety-seven percent declared they are conscious of what they eat on a daily basis. Fifty-nine percent of the women confessed that they almost *regularly* compare themselves to other women, with thirty-three percent stating they *sometimes* compare themselves. Less than one percent said they *never* compare themselves.¹

The women surveyed, ranging in age from their teens to their sixties, represent a diverse group of women. They are young women who are coming of age in an airbrushed and hyper-sexualized society, young mothers grappling with their post-baby bodies, middle-aged women who are seeing the effects of gravity and aging, and older women who are experiencing the reality of a body that is losing its functionality. They represent physically healthy women as well as those struggling with chronic pain, illness, and disabilities. They

represent women who engage in regular physical activity and those who don't, women who have struggled with eating disorders and women who haven't. They are women who feel inadequate because of their thin frames and women who feel inadequate because of their ample frames.

While this is a diverse group of women, they all share one commonality: an underlying discomfort in their own skin and a desire to measure up to a standard—whether their own personal expectations or those imposed on them by society. And this goes beyond mere body and body image issues. For a woman, her image is often embodied in everything she portrays to a watching world—her appearance, her home, her children, her husband, her job, her schooling, her accomplishments, and of course, her body.

The inability to be comfortable in her skin manifests itself in different ways in different women. Some women may find it hard to genuinely engage other women who they find prettier, fitter, or better dressed. Some may spend inordinate amounts of time and money attempting to craft the perfect image through diet, exercise, clothing, and cosmetics. Still more may experience the pangs of inferiority, insecurity, envy, and jealousy. Some may be hypersensitive about certain aspects of their bodies, like their post-baby bellies, and have trouble engaging in physical intimacy with their husbands. Other women may avoid social gatherings that require a swimsuit and may even avoid exercising around others for fear of being judged.

Though many women have at least one aspect of their body they are frustrated with, not every woman struggles with discontentment and despair. Some women may be content with their bodies and have not had to work through body-related issues yet. For these women, it may be hard to be compassionate and to relate to the feelings of inadequacy other women have toward their bodies. Instead of frustration or despair regarding their bodies, they feel a sense of personal pride and judgment toward those who “don’t take care of themselves” or who don’t exercise self-control. Or they may find themselves on the receiving end of judgment when women who see their naturally lean build roll their eyes and say, “I wish I had your problem.” A woman who is athletically inclined may feel proud of the way her body performs. Perhaps some women even use their bodies as a way to gain affirmation and overcome insecurities in other areas of their lives.

At some point in time, we will all face issues of aging or disease that will impact the form (appearance) and the functionality (performance) of our bodies. **Regardless of your current feelings about your body—whether content, proud, or discouraged—you cannot afford to place your confidence in your body in form or in functionality because both will fade and one day fail you.** It is important to approach this topic with an open mind because the manifestations of body-related issues are more insidious and systemic than we may currently recognize.

Questions for Reflection

1. What three words would you use to describe your body?

2. What three words would you use to describe the bodies of some of your friends?
3. Are your descriptions of yourself better or worse than your descriptions of your friends? Why? Discuss as a group.
4. How do you receive compliments from others? Is your response different when receiving compliments on appearance versus compliments on your character? What kind of compliments do you value most?
5. Do you identify as more content with your body or more frustrated? Why?
6. Which aspect of your body do you struggle with most—the form (appearance) or functionality (performance)?

HUMBLE DEPENDENCE

When I first began studying this topic, I thought I knew the answers I would find. But what I didn't realize is that I was approaching this topic with my own preconceived ideas and solutions, and I thought Scripture would confirm my opinions. But over time, the Lord revealed my arrogance and exposed the sin within my own heart. The issue of body and body image is complex. It is not as easy as covering up your mirror or accepting yourself as you are, and we need to resist the temptation to prescribe either overly simplistic or overly rigid solutions.

A topic of this nature requires an open mind and a spirit of humility. It is possible that what we have thought and practiced over the years may not actually be true. Scripture must be our guide and our foundation if we hope to find clarity and freedom. Though the Bible doesn't provide much specific direction regarding diet, exercise,

and general self-care, it does have plenty to say about how a woman who follows Christ should think, feel, and act toward her body. God has given us everything we need for living a godly life (2 Peter 1:3). Therefore, we will approach the Scripture with humble dependence and confidence as we seek clarity through the Holy Spirit and biblical community regarding what our bodies mean to the Lord and how we should care for them in response.

Throughout this study, we will submit ourselves to Scripture, not make Scripture submit to us. It is important to resist the temptation to say more than Scripture on this subject. This may frustrate those of us who want a quick-fix or simple formula, because it leaves us in a position of tension where we have to seek the Lord through Scripture, the Holy Spirit, and biblical community regarding what it looks like to be faithful stewards of our bodies. This does not mean that science, society, culture, and doctors have nothing of value to offer us. On the contrary, God is at work in this world, through believers and unbelievers, for the good of the earth. He uses the advancements of science, the wisdom of the culture, and the knowledge we have gained through study of the body to aid us in tending to the needs of all mankind. Therefore, we can recognize that science and doctors may have much to say on this and many other topics. Our job is to take what we learn from them and examine it by God's Word—holding it up to the light of his truth and allowing Scripture to determine whether a thing is true, wise, prudent, good for us, good for others, and glorifying to God.

CULTURAL IMPACT

Women in the western culture are inundated with media's portrayal of ideal bodies—whether it's tall and lean or voluptuous and sexy. In his documentary *America the Beautiful*, Darryl Roberts estimated that the average teenager is exposed to 3.3 hours of magazines, 7.6 hours of Internet, and 10.6 hours of television per week.² These carefully constructed images persuade us to buy into the lie displayed on the cover of every magazine, billboard, television, and movie screen. And with the introduction of social media, it is easier than ever to compare yourself to women all over the world. No matter how vigilant you are to protect yourself from the unrealistic ideals portrayed, they are inescapable.

We are responsible for how we respond to these images, but we cannot deny the impact they have over time and ongoing exposure. Roberts cited a case conducted in Fiji by Harvard sociologist Dr. Anne Becker. Becker visited Fiji in 1982 before western television had been introduced and found that a larger body was the valued standard for women at that time. A larger woman indicated strength, health, and ability, which was highly important in that society. *Her body reflected the needs of the community.* But when western television shows, such as *Melrose Place* and *Beverly Hills 90210*, were introduced in 1995, all of that began to change. After three years of exposure to these programs, eleven percent of young girls admitted to vomiting to control their weight, teen drug use and pregnancy were on the rise, and a general disrespect of authority had increased as well. Becker concluded that in just three short years, centuries of cultural traditions had been undone.

While this issue is pervasive in our western society, there are standards of beauty that govern every culture. In countries like India, Thailand, and some parts of Africa, having lighter skin is associated with affluence and has caused a surge in the skin-lightening cream industry. In Mauritania, there are fat-farms, not to slim women down but to fatten them up, because larger women are considered more attractive.³ In South Korea, more women are having plastic surgery to widen their eyes, making them appear more western. In Ethiopia, young girls are cut over and over again in order to develop scars in intricate patterns in order to attract a husband. And in Iran, bandages from nose jobs are sported as badges of honor as the women embark on the ultimate quest for beauty and affluence.⁴

It is plain to see that, all over the world, a woman's quest for image, beauty, significance, and approval comes at great cost. But this doesn't even begin to take into account the numbers of women who suffer from disordered eating like anorexia and bulimia, those who are morbidly obese, the millions undergoing countless elective procedures to alter their appearance, those enslaved to their gym routines and diet regimens, the women frantically searching for the right formulas and anti-aging creams, women who self-medicate through food, and those who silently suffer general feelings of discontent and inadequacy.

There is no lack of advice and prescriptions within our world today. If you have a problem, someone has a solution, something to say, a promise to offer, or a product to sell you. Everyone believes they have the right diet, the right form of exercise, the right pill. Fad

diets and new trends in exercise are a dime a dozen. The messages of our society are loud and clear: you need to lose weight, shape up, erase the signs of aging and wrinkles on your face, and develop rock-hard abs. *We are so disoriented by the multitude of messages bombarding us that it is hard to know how to define a healthy body and body image.*

Two dominant voices speaking into this topic are pop culture and religious culture. Mainstream culture often has an obsessive perspective toward the body, while many faith-based cultures marginalize the importance of the body, focusing on “higher” matters of the soul. While both may have positive contributions to make, by themselves they offer incomplete and conflicting views that leave women struggling to find freedom in this area of their lives. Below are some of the more common ideas present within each:

<i>Messages in Pop Culture</i>	<i>Messages in Religious Culture</i>
“Thin is in”	The body isn’t important, doesn’t matter
“Strong is the new skinny”	Taking care of your body is selfish
“Real women have curves”	A woman’s body entices a man to sin
Perfection is the goal/standard	The inner person is all that matters
Perfection is achievable	Focus on outward appearance is vanity
You are entitled to beauty	Beauty is irrelevant/should be rejected
The body is elevated to exclusion of soul	The soul is elevated to exclusion of body
How you look determines your value	How you look determines your spirituality (e.g., a healthy person is more spiritual; a modest/frumpy person is more spiritual)
Fitness and diet will prolong your life	The body isn’t meant to be preserved
Youth is more valued	Wisdom is more valued

Looking at these conflicting messages, it is obvious why we have so much trouble navigating this area of our lives. The messages we hear on a regular basis are contradictory at best and disorienting at worst. This makes it a challenge for a woman who follows Christ to know how she should think about, care for, and feel about her body. We could continue to put forth overly simplistic, self-help ideologies like self-acceptance and self-affirmation. We could respond to the cultural ideals of beauty by boycotting, lobbying, and taking an in-your-face approach, touting that others need to appreciate us just as we are. Or we could settle into a victim mentality, believing we are just the unfortunate recipients of bad genes or stuck in a society that overly emphasizes physical beauty. *But all of these solutions will fall far short of the real, abiding peace and freedom available to us as Christians.*

GETTING CLEAR BEFORE WE MOVE ON

Before we go further, we must address a couple of issues. If you are like me, it is entirely possible that you are also bringing in pre-conceived ideas/beliefs on what's right, what's good, what's wrong, what's better regarding your body, and how you should take care of it. Or perhaps you have unrealistic expectations and are coming in looking for a fix that no study can provide you. Similarly, we all have baggage and real wounds in this area. Many women have been shaped by behavior and attitudes that were modeled by our mothers, grandmothers, cousins, friends, or other significant women. Probably just as many have been affected by our fathers and other significant male figures. Some women still bear the scars from the thoughtless and unkind words of others. Whatever names you were called, whatever hurtful things were said to you, these words helped shape how you

view yourself today. This baggage and these wounds cause many women to self-protect or self-promote in a way that can make it virtually impossible for others to speak into their lives regarding their bodies. So before we move on, it is important to take some time to reflect on the following questions:

What hurts and insecurities are you bringing into this study?

How might past wounds be blinding you to your own sin in this area?

What preconceived ideas about the body and care of the body are you bringing into this study?

In what ways are you currently enslaved in your own sin and paralyzed from moving toward help and healing?

What expectations do you have from this study? Are they realistic expectations?

In what ways do you hope to grow in knowledge, understanding, and practice where your body is concerned?

Over the coming weeks, commit these things to prayer. Instead of asking the Lord to fill your desires and meet your expectations, ask him to transform your desires so that they match his desires for you. Likewise, take your hurts and insecurities to the Lord and ask him to bring the healing and comfort you need in order to move on and grow.

WHY A STUDY ON THE BODY?

The author of Hebrews said we should “throw off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up” that we might run the race of faith with endurance (Hebrews 12:1 NLT). A life of faith requires endurance. We won’t be able to endure well as followers of Christ with sin and baggage entangling us. Both despair and pride about her body will weigh a woman down, distract her from the goal, and hinder her from moving forward in faith and obedience to the Lord and service to others. **As a Christian woman, how you think about and care for your body is an issue of discipleship and growth in spiritual maturity.** It is important to note here, though, that how you care for your body has nothing to do with God’s love for and acceptance of you. *You are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone.*

God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

~ Ephesians 2:8–10 NLT

How you feel about and care or don’t care for your body has no bearing on who you are in Christ. You are fully accepted by God because of Christ’s righteousness, not based on your own performance. But how you feel about and care or don’t care for your body can determine the measure of joy you experience in this life as well as

hinder your growth in spiritual maturity and your effectiveness for the kingdom of God.

The book of Proverbs rightly warns us that “there is a path before each person that seems right, but it ends in death” (Proverbs 14:12 NLT). The topic of our bodies is a sensitive and deeply personal one, but it is one we must address. If we are to find real freedom and hope, then we must be willing to have our own sin, idolatry, weaknesses, and preconceived ideas exposed. The real problem is not how we look, how much we weigh, whether we are young or old, tall or short, big-boned or petite. *The real issue is sin and the distinctive way it manifests itself in the life of a woman and how she looks to Christ to free her from captivity to that sin.* Our goal is not about identifying a specific health or fitness solution. **The goal of this study is to help us learn why the body matters to the Lord and how we should care for the bodies he has entrusted to us in order that we may fulfill his purposes.**

Therefore, let us approach this study as the psalmist who prayed, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life” (Psalm 139:23–24 NLT).

Questions for Reflection

1. In the Fiji study, Dr. Becker found that the valued standard for the Fijian woman’s body reflected the needs of her community. Does the western ideal for a woman’s body reflect the needs of the community? Why or why not? Discuss as a group.

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2. How aware are you of your body or appearance? How often does it cross your mind?
3. How would you define beauty? Discuss as a group.
4. What do you hope to gain through this study?