



all things bright and beautiful

PART SIX – THE GOODNESS OF OUR BODIES

By Pastor Ricky Stephen

Psalm 139:1-18

THE PROBLEM OF OUR BODIES

We've got a problem, and it's our bodies.

They are weak, sick, aging and imperfect—failing to match how we imagine ourselves.

Our culture offers two solutions:

- One is Escape: the dream of uploading our minds into machines, living in a self-made digital paradise where bodies don't matter. *Who I am is who I am on the inside, anyway.*
- The other is Perfection: reclaiming value through control. One billionaire pursues immortality through fasting, supplements, and sleep schedules. It's his modern 'blueprint' for eternal youth. It doesn't look like living.

Whether through escape or perfection, we have a problem with the body. Scripture offers another vision - *The body is good and it exists to love and be loved.*

1. WOMB TO TOMB UNDER GOD'S CARE

Psalm 139 is a meditation on what it means to be made in the image of God.

At creation, after making humanity,

“God saw all that he had made, and it was very good...”
Genesis 1:31a

Psalm 139 declares that God knows us completely and was intimately involved in our creation: “...you knit me together in my mother’s womb” (v.13b).

When imagining if they can flee from God's Spirit, the psalmist says they could go to 'the depths' and God would still be there (v.8)—a euphemism for the grave. From there, the psalmist meditates on how 'darkness is not dark' for God (v.11-12). This leads to a meditation on another darkness, the darkness of the mother's womb (v.13).

Being made in God's image is to say from the darkness of the womb to the darkness of the tomb, a darkness we will be called out of, is under God's care. Being made in God's image is an inherent dignity. Every human being is God's special creation, regardless of capacity, age, race or gender.

NOTES

[illegible]

Our bodies share in this dignity. They are part of who we are. Jesus came in a body, died in a body and was raised in a body - showing the goodness of human life in the body.

Dallas Willard wrote,

“My body is the original and primary place of my dominion and my responsibility... it is part of who I am and essential to my identity.”¹

The Bible teaches a psychosomatic unity— ‘Psyche’ for soul and ‘Soma’ for body - soul and body together. Our bodies express who we are and shape what is fitting for us.

Our bodies are good because God made them, cares for them and calls them His image.

2. THE IDOLS OF THE IDEAL

Our culture has been drifting from the biblical vision of the sanctity of life and the goodness of the body. We have bowed to the idols of the ideal—two ideas about where our value lies: *either who I am is who I am inside, or my value comes from perfecting the outside.*

a. Who I Am Is Who I Am on the Inside

We often assume we see our bodies as valuable, but our real beliefs show elsewhere. A story is told of a young woman engaged to be married who reacted angrily when her fiancé admired her body. Her father, a theologian, gently asked, ‘When did you become a gnostic? When did you come to believe that someone who loves your body doesn’t also love your soul?’

In Corinth, the church had the opposite problem. Some justified sexual immorality by saying,

“Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both.”

1 Corinthians 6:13a

Paul replied,

“The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body... Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself?”

1 Corinthians. 6:13b & 15a

Our bodies are not disposable shells. God will raise them, and what we do with them matters. In contrast, the philosopher Epictetus called humans,

“a little wisp of soul carrying a corpse.”² Ideas like that still shape us. If we are only what we are inside, our bodies have no moral meaning.

Nancy Pearcey, in *Love Thy Body*, shows how this view underlies much of modern culture:

If what we are is who we are on the inside:

- * Then sex has no covenantal meaning.
- * Then our bodies can be altered at will.
- * Then the dying and unborn lose their value.³

Each of these issues involves deep pain and complexity, and Christians are called to respond with both truth and compassion. Beneath them lies a single falsehood - that the body is not essential to personhood.

Focusing on the goodness of creation is not sentimental. It is a radical claim about the sanctity of life. Locating our worth only in consciousness or soul is to see ourselves as ‘a wisp of soul carrying a corpse;’ but Scripture says,

*“You knit me together in my mother’s womb;
I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”*

Ps. 139:13–14

b. My Value Comes in Perfecting the Outside

The second idol is the belief that our worth comes from perfecting the body. I learned this early, as a skinny and sensitive kid trying to bulk up in the gym. After an injury, my counselor asked me a question I’ve never forgotten: ‘Why are you trying to perfect what God has already called good?’

NOTES

Our world sells the opposite message. Everywhere we turn, we see the ideal body. Steroid use, eating disorders and endless comparison all follow from this worship of perfection.

Scripture tells a different story. Physical descriptions are rare, and when they do appear, they often overturn expectations. Esau is the rugged hunter. Jacob is a limping son who stays near the tents to be mama's special kitchen helper (see Genesis 25, 27). Jacob receives the promise (see Romans 9:10-13). Saul is tall and impressive, but David, the youngest and smallest, becomes king (see 1 Samuel 9-10, 16).

Vanity is placing our value in strength, beauty or health - God doesn't. We are to care for our bodies out of love, not hatred; to exercise not to change them, but to celebrate them.

We should also strive to be conscious of the media we consume. Our perspectives on the 'ideal' and 'perfection' are shaped by our consumption, and we stop seeing beauty where God sees it—in everyone and everything.

Jesus himself is the image of our ideal. Isaiah wrote,

"He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him."
Isaiah 53:2

Jesus defied every human standard of beauty or power. Yet in His body He revealed God's image perfectly.

He blessed our imperfect bodies by taking one on himself. In Him, we learn that the body is not something to escape or perfect, but something through which we love and are loved.

3. MADE TO LOVE

A popular atheist argued that the human shoulder is poorly designed, and, therefore, is evidence against intelligent design. The assumption under this statement is that an all powerful God would design with the purpose of efficiency and strength. If weakness is part of the design, there may be another purpose.

Perhaps we were made to love and be loved.

Love is the defining capacity of Jesus. His body is how God's love entered the world. Christ's love shows itself in weakness as much as in power. Love often requires

vulnerability. The first humans were not superheroes but limited creatures working with hands and feet. After creating them, God said Adam and his wife were naked and felt no shame (Genesis 2:25). That nakedness signals embodied dependence.

Our value comes from God's word over us, and our chief purpose is love. Love can baffle the greatest mind and express itself through those who have no words.

Christians have long cared for those other cultures discarded. Ancient practices of abandoning infants are answered by Christian care for the vulnerable. Today our community supports work such as Naomi's "Treasures of God" in Guatemala and the Hopewell Clinic on the North Shore. Two missions upholding the goodness of human bodies, the differently abled and the unborn, for their intended purpose—love.

We were knit together in the womb and fearfully made for love. This is not abstract theology but a call to ordinary compassion.

4. MADE TO BE LOVED

Because of the idols of internal or external perfection, our world assumes value lies in health, beauty or strength. We are told our worth comes from what we can give. When our capacity to give diminishes, due to illness or accident, some conclude they have 'outlived their usefulness' and choose death.

Usefulness is the wrong category entirely. Pain, sickness and death are real problems due to the fall, but weakness or loss of ability does not erase our value.

NOTES

Why?

Because we were not just made to love, but to be loved.

In Jesus' parable of the final judgment, the sheep are welcomed into His kingdom for helping the poor, weak and imprisoned, because,

"...whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."
(Matthew 25:40)

Loving someone in weakness is loving Jesus.

Stretch this further, the most important thing we do may not be how we serve, but how we are served. Our greatest contribution to God's kingdom may come not from strength, but from weakness.

All parents get a sense that their children are the most significant discipleship influence in their lives. Caring for someone in their weakness and vulnerability is often the way we become most like Jesus.

We are also made to be loved by God. Paul speaks of this in 2 Corinthians, the book of the theology of weakness:

"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."
2 Corinthians 4:7

Paul himself suffered an unknown ailment, likely an eye disease, and prayed for healing. Jesus said,

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."
2 Corinthians 12:9

While suffering, Paul allowed the Galatian community to care for him, saying,

"...you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself."
Galatians 4:14b

Paul understood that being loved in weakness is a way to be Jesus to someone. A strong theology of weakness is what our world needs. When weakness becomes the place God shows His grace and people meet Jesus in us, real love becomes possible.

5. THE BODY TO COME

Sickness, pain and death are not forever. The effects of the fall will be undone. Our bodies will be transformed. Paul writes to the Corinthians:

"Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed... For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed... Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"
(1 Cor. 15:51-55)

Even darkness cannot hide us. The Father spoke light into the void. Jesus called Lazarus from the grave. The Spirit perfects strength in our weakness.

Our bodies are good now, though not perfect. We await the day they become like Jesus' risen body. Until then, they are the place where we love and are loved, by God and each other. Love your body, and love the bodies the world neglects, knowing God loves them.

ENDNOTES

1. Willard, Dallas Willard. (7 Dec 2021). Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ. NavPress. pg. 167
2. Quoted in Marcus Aurelius' Meditation 4.41. Lexundria. https://lexundria.com/m_aur_med/4.41/lg#:~:text=Marcus%20Aurelius%20translated%20by%20George,4.42%20%7C%20About%20This%20Work%20%C2%BB
3. Pearcey, Nancy. (18 June 2019). Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality. Baker Books.

NOTES



Open Up

What experiences have shaped the way you think about your body? What words, good or bad, have people said regarding your body; and how have they affected you?

Dig In

1. Read Ps. 139:1-18

- a) Psalm 139, as an extended meditation on being made in God's image (Gen. 1:26-27), has implications for how we think about birth, sex and death—issues like MAiD, abortion and transgender issues. How have you seen the connection between the goodness of our bodies and these cultural issues? What are you curious about?
- b) The Psalmist imagines God intimately involved in their creation (vv.13-16). In what ways are you currently trying to perfect what God has called good? What would accepting the goodness of your body look like?
- c) Our culture bombards us with images of perfection. What are you doing to protect your heart and mind in this culture?
- d) How does seeing your purpose as loving and being loved change the way you see your life?

Prayer:

If anything personal has been shared about a narrative or word spoken over somebodies' body, pray against the negative words and ask God to help us accept our bodies as good. Pray for wisdom regarding our engagement in the public issues stemming from our view of our bodies.