

Word One Bible Study

Keeping the Body Image Beast at Bay...Protecting Personal Integrity & Identity

by Kristin Schmidt

Note to the Leader: *It may seem that an eating disorder is some sort of fad or passing phase, easily gotten into or out of. However, it is much more serious than that. These afflictions are a form of disease and addiction, and if not handled carefully, an eating disorder quickly becomes deadly. Once fallen into, a teen may struggle for months or years with the dangerous demon of anorexia or bulimia. Eating disorders are issues of identity concern and fear, among other things. The best way to prevent and treat these problems is with relationships. Communicating with teens and making sure they know they are loved goes a long way. It is also critical to instill identity in Christ. Youngsters are bombarded with media and social messages screaming that outer appearance is key to success and acceptance. Girls especially get the idea that they can only be satisfied with themselves if their bodies are "perfect." This study seeks to emphasize what a body is and is not, with intent to promote confidence and self-worth in youth. Degree of focus can vary according to need of the group, and these principles can coincide with other studies on body, outer appearance and priorities.*

Open the session with a discussion of some pictures...pass around and view pictures of several body types, including celebrities, models, athletes and "average" types of people. Discuss these photos and describe them, pointing out differences among the people within and also connotations that come up upon viewing each one. Note how we tend to think things based on physical appearance, but do we truly know anything about these people? Are the models realistic ideals? Is outward body all that important? Brainstorm what we know about the body and what God says about it.

Bible Emphasis: Taking care of our physical bodies is important, but it cannot become a top priority, and it is essential to remember that our bodies were created by God. When He created Adam and Eve in His image, He proclaimed them "very good." While we still carry in our flesh the weight of sin, in Baptism the image of God has been restored. God looks at us and sees what He created—nothing but His goodness. It may sound a little like a parent telling a child, "but you're perfect in my eyes," but here is the Perfect One telling us all that we are perfect, body and soul, in His eyes. And we show gratitude and respect for what God has created and given us by treating ourselves thoughtfully. The Bible tells us that the body is a temple:

Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰ you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

We want to take care of the temple, to honor our bodies because they are the dwelling place of the Holy One. Emphasize, though, that we worship *in* the temple. We do not worship the temple. It is a place of worship but should not become an object of worship. It is certainly possible to grow too concerned with physical features and bodily issues. We want to use our bodies for Him, but to praise the Creator, not the creation. Honoring and caring for our bodies means that we do what we know is good for them: exercise, sleep and nourish ourselves—for Him.

Our bodies are important in that they enable us to serve the Creator. We live in a culture obsessed with appearance, in which millions are spent on health and cosmetic products. But what does God say?

The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart. (1 Samuel 16:7)

We can take care of ourselves, sure, but placing all of our effort into merely maintaining outward appearances could be meaningless. Certainly God wants us to eat in a healthy manner with the good gifts of food He gives

to us daily. Exercise is also important, but not so that we can become obsessed with the body so much as holistically live and serve Him in His kingdom.

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. (1 Timothy 4:8)

Trophies grow tarnished and ribbons fade. Skin wrinkles and muscles weaken; but those who hope in the Lord will not be disappointed. We are precious in His eyes because He has created us.

*For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well. (Psalm 139:13-14)*

We are reminded of how God has created and provided for us in the explanation to the First Article of the Apostles' Creed:

"I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my limbs, my reason, and all my senses, and still preserves them; in addition thereto, clothing and shoes, meat and drink, house and homestead, wife and children, fields, cattle, and all my goods; that He provides me richly and daily with all that I need to support this body and life, protects me from all danger, and guards me and preserves me from all evil; and all this out of pure, fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me; for all which I owe it to Him to think, praise, serve, and obey Him. This is most certainly true."

Sometimes we grow disappointed in our appearance. We may develop a low sense of self-esteem or self-worth. We may view our bodies as ugly or weak, or be frustrated with how we feel in our own skins. But how can we say that about something God has created? He makes all people in His own image and loves us. No, we are not perfect. But we are made by One who is.

Follow-up Questions:

- What do you think is God's image of our physical bodies?
- Why are we all made so different? If the outer appearance is not important, why can't we just have the same "uniform" on the outside?
- What would you tell a friend who has a negative view of his or her body? What do you think God would say?
- How can we use the Word of God and prayer to boost our own confidence?

Additional Resources:

<http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/>

Website with information on signs and symptoms, as well as treatment and aid for eating disorders.

http://kidshealth.org/teen/food_fitness/problems/eat_disorder.html

Information for younger students on treatment and aid for eating disorders

<http://www.eatingdisorderfoundation.org/EatingDisorders.htm>

Further help and details on recognizing and treating eating disorders.

http://selfesteem.dove.us/Teaching_resources.aspx

Body image and self-esteem lessons for girls (and males) of teen ages.