

SERMON TITLE: "Developing Physical Strength for Life's Challenges"
SERMON TEXT: Daniel 1:3-5, 8-17
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: January 5, 2020, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Do you ever read the comic strip *Pickles*? *Pickles* is about an elderly couple named Earl and Opal. In one of my favorite *Pickles* strips, Opal was at the beauty shop sitting under a hair dryer. She was having a conversation with the lady next to her. In the first frame Opal confided, "I used to have a dream where I'd lose so much weight that my skirt would fall down." In the second frame, she continued, "Then it actually happened." "Really?" questioned the wide-eyed woman beside her. "Yes," Opal replied in the third frame. "Only it wasn't because of weight loss." The fourth frame held the punch line: "The elastic waistband gave out, and my skirt fell down as I was walking into church."¹

I couldn't resist sharing that bit of humor with you because, at this time of year, many of us have dreams of losing weight. On New Year's Day, I, for one, woke up determined to do something about my physical health. Over the latter half of 2019, I'd added several pounds, so that my clothes have been feeling uncomfortably tight. Summer ice cream, Halloween candy, Thanksgiving turkey, Christmas cookies, and New Year's Eve munchies were fun while it lasted, but now it's time to start some healthier habits and get my body back on track.

I know I'm not alone in this desire and need to shape up and gain some physical strength. Many of you have been thinking similar thoughts and taking similar actions over the past few days. As we look forward to this new year ahead of us, we don't know exactly what opportunities and troubles we'll face. But we're smart enough to know that everything we do in life is easier if we're healthy and strong, and everything we want to do becomes a lot more complicated if our bodies are sickly and weak. That's why, on this first Sunday of 2020, I invite you to consider the biblical story from Daniel chapter one and think with me about developing physical strength for life's challenges.

BIBLICAL STORY

Let's begin by reviewing what happened in this story. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar and his army conquered Jerusalem and took many of the Jewish people into captivity in the country of Babylonia. Then the Babylonian king ordered his servants to select and train some of the brightest and healthiest of the young Jewish men to serve in the king's court. Among those selected were Daniel and his three friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

While Daniel and his Jewish friends were willing to be trained and serve in the king's court, they didn't want to defile themselves by eating the kind of food and wine that would normally be provided to Babylonian trainees. So Daniel asked the palace master for permission not to defile himself. The palace master was unwilling to change the dietary protocol, however, because he feared that the Jewish men would become less healthy than their peers, and that he would then get into trouble with the king.

After the palace master refused to cooperate, Daniel approached the lower-level guard who was assigned to watch over the four Jews. That guard also was afraid of getting in trouble, but Daniel persuaded him to let them eat only vegetables and drink only water for 10 days, as a test. At the end of the 10 days, it turned out that Daniel and his three friends were healthier than those who ate the royal rations. So the guard allowed Daniel and his friends to continue on their special diet, even as they proved themselves to be blessed by God with extraordinary knowledge and skills.

You could say that Daniel and his friends are the saints of dieters and the superheroes of those who want to be strong in body. So let's think about what made them so successful.

1—MOTIVATED BY FAITH

First of all, they were motivated by their faith. Daniel and his friends believed that obeying their Jewish food laws was an act of spiritual obedience and loyalty to God. If they did their part to stay true to God, then God would be faithful to them. That sense of spiritual covenant didn't just apply when

they were back home in Jerusalem. God was still with them, even while they were exiles in this distant country. So Daniel and his friends intended to stay true to God and keep up their end of the bargain.

Throughout the centuries, other people have also been motivated by their faith to adopt dietary restrictions and other healthful habits. Mohammed taught the Muslims to follow many of the same dietary restrictions found in the Jewish Old Testament. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians indicates that early Christians had concerns about eating food that had been sacrificed to idols. In the early centuries of the church, ascetics severely reduced their food intake. Later, Catholics gave up red meat on Fridays—at least during Lent. In the 1700s, John Wesley encouraged the early Methodists to fast one day per week; and, in the 1800s, many American Methodists gave up alcohol as an act of faith. During that same century, Mormons began teaching their people to abstain from certain beverages, and the Seventh Day Adventists began promoting vegetarianism.

I know we sometimes scoff at religious dietary rules, thinking that they're too restrictive and maybe even silly. And maybe some of them are. But you know what? In 2005, the National Institutes of Health did a study on Seventh Day Adventists in California and discovered that, on average, they live four to ten years longer than other Californians.² Even if we don't follow dietary and other religious health rules 100% legalistically, having a religious tradition that pays attention to health issues often helps us to do better than we might on our own. Both the taboos and the encouragement of faith can provide a lot of motivational power that actually leads to healthy living.

2—BALANCED RISK AND SIMPLICITY

A second reason Daniel and his friends were successful in their efforts to be strong in their bodies was that they balanced risk and simplicity. Asking the palace master and the lower-level guard to make special allowances for their diet was a pretty big risk. Those in charge could have easily punished the Jewish men severely for their insolence. "How dare you ask for different food! You should be grateful that the king has chosen you for this important position. People around you are surviving on

much less. You should appreciate that you are provided these royal rations of food and wine!” It’s easy for us to imagine that Daniel and his Jewish friends could have been thrown out of the trainee program, emotionally abused, physically punished, and even executed.

Maybe the reason why Daniel and his friends survived that possibility was that they balanced the risk with simplicity. Notice that they didn’t burden their captors with all the technical details of a Jewish kosher diet. For instance, they didn’t say, “We Jews can eat lamb, goat, and fish, but not pork or shellfish.” They didn’t go into lengthy explanations about how meat and dairy had to be prepared separately or why Jews could drink Jewish wine, yet the Babylonian wine was unacceptable to them. Instead, Daniel kept his request very simple. “We only want vegetables and water.” That simple request was something the lower-level guard, at least, was willing to give a try.

The reason I’m bringing up this point is that I think we often fail in our attempts to be physically healthy because we fail to get this balance right. Maybe we don’t take enough risk; consequently, we stay stuck in our comfortable ruts and old habits. We magically think that this is the year we’re going to become physically fit—even as we continue to sit in our recliner watching TV and eating potato chips. Or, we go to the other extreme. We make our new fitness plan overly complicated and difficult. We tell ourselves that the only way we can succeed is to run five miles every day, to buy expensive and exotic diet food, or to count every carb and calorie. Before we know it, we are overwhelmed and tired of it all, and we throw in the towel.

Obviously, no one diet or exercise plan is going to be perfect for everyone. But any plan that is going to succeed will balance some risk with some simplicity. For example, wearing a pedometer is a simple way to make sure that we get enough steps every day. Some fitness trackers will measure other kinds of movement too. As for what we eat, some of us are able to manage counting calories with a computer app. But, to cut back on calories, maybe the easiest thing to do is to consciously sacrifice one thing per day. Just make a decision that each day you will resist eating one serving of food you might

otherwise have eaten. It could be a dessert, a second helping, a snack, or the second half of a large restaurant portion. Just make sure that you aren't skipping only the vegetables!

3—GROUP SUPPORT

A third reason Daniel and his friends were physically healthy and strong was that they had group support for their endeavor. Even though Daniel was the obvious leader of this effort, he wasn't alone. His three Jewish friends participated with him, and the lower-level guard agreed to help provide them with what they needed.

If we're going to be healthy and strong today, we also need the support of other people. Very often the reason we fail to be healthy and strong individuals is that our families and friends discourage our wellness efforts. Fortunately, though, we aren't limited to the influence of those people. We can join Weight Watchers or an exercise class. We can hit the ski slopes, go bowling or swimming, or otherwise hang out with people who want to be active and strong.

In his 2013 book *The Daniel Plan*, megachurch pastor Rick Warren tells how he challenged his congregation and *together* they lost over 250,000 pounds in the first year. Warren says that "faith and friends . . . are *the secret sauce*" that enable us to become stronger and healthier people. "When you have *God and a group* helping you," he writes, "now you have far more than willpower helping you make positive changes, and you are far more likely to stay consistent."³

CONCLUSION

In this new year of 2020, we want to be able to make the best of whatever opportunities or troubles come our way. We won't be able to do that very well if we're sickly, weak, and overweight. So let's make a pact together, today. Let's do what it takes to get ourselves in shape. Let's get busy developing physical strength for life's challenges.

¹Brian Crane, 1/1/14.

²Buettner, Dan (November 16, 2005). "The Secrets of Long Life," *National Geographic* 208 (5):2–27. ISSN 0027-9358. Retrieved 2006-06-06. Excerpt. See also *National Geographic*, "Sights & Sounds of Longevity." I found all this at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seventh-day_Adventist_Church.

³Warren, Amen, & Hyman (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI), p. 16.