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Series Foreword

Welcome to Real Faith, Real Life, a series of *We Believe* Bible studies for young adults—and adults young at heart. These six-session studies are topic-based, biblically grounded, and steeped in the Reformed tradition. They are best suited to a small-group meeting in a comfortable space, such as someone’s house or apartment, or a favorite coffee shop. A group should be no more than twelve persons—eight would be ideal.

It is important that participants commit to attending all the sessions, if possible. This is crucial for building a level of trust in the group. It is suggested that each person have his or her own copy of the study guide in order to follow the lesson outline. At the first meeting, you may designate someone to be the leader throughout the course, or you may have a different person lead each session. Either way, the leader will function more as a facilitator of discussions and timekeeper of activities than as a lecturer. Occasionally there will be instructions for the leader included in individual sessions.

The Introduction and Biblical Reflection sections are crucial for each session. You may decide that each participant should read them before gathering, or you may read them aloud as a group when you meet.

Some of the session designs include a specific way to do sharing and/or prayer. Even if a written prayer is not included, be sure to include time for prayer as a component of meeting together. Give all persons the chance to offer a prayer if they feel comfortable doing so. Set aside time at the beginning or end for participants to share some of what has been happening in their lives since the group last met. An easy way to do this is to go from one person to the next, sharing the highlights and lowlights of the week.

As Christians, we believe that the Bible is an extraordinary gift from God and, therefore, the most important book we will ever read or study. Yet understanding the claims God’s Word makes on our lives can be a challenging task. Consider having some other resources around as you engage in your study. The resources listed in For Further Study at the end of each study guide are excellent reference tools that are there to help you.

Introduction

“So God created humankind in God’s image . . .” (Genesis 1:27a). Human beings, male and female, were created to be a reflection of God’s image. What that means has been discussed throughout the ages. Are our bodies a reflection of what God actually looks like? Do we reflect God’s image through our actions? Is it the soul that is the reflection and the body just a shell housing the soul? What does it mean to be created in God’s image?

No matter what part of being human you think reflects God’s image, God created our bodies. Our bodies are a part of the creation God made and declared good. God chose to become human, dwelling in a body just like ours. Jesus’ body was not different from ours. If it had been, we would probably have a description of how Jesus looked. The apostle Paul tells us our bodies are temples to God (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). We should treat them with the same care we would give to a sanctuary, a holy place.

So why do we spend so much time re-creating our bodies? In whose image do we try to shape ourselves? Our culture focuses much more on how to shape our bodies into the image of another person than on celebrating all the shapes our bodies come in. We do not have perfect bodies, but we have good bodies—bodies that were designed and shaped by a loving God to reflect the love God has for all creation.

Does how we treat ourselves reflect our relationship with God? In this book, the answer is yes. How we treat ourselves—what we do to and with our bodies—is a reflection of our relationship with God. This book will guide you through a study of the gifts God has given us for healthy living: our physical bodies, food, exercise, sleep, touch, and play. These are gifts God has given to us, to be used the same way we use our other gifts—to glorify God.

Using This Study Guide

This study invites the participants to explore how the physical body is connected to the spiritual life. The body/spirit (or body/mind) split is very common in Western culture. Classic philosophers, including Plato, and early Christian writers, including Paul, depicted the body and mind/spirit as opposing one another. The philosopher Pythagorus (582–507 B.C.) wrote, “Choose rather to be strong of soul than strong of body.”¹ In the ancient Greek culture, the body was viewed as a vessel or in negative terms as a prison for the soul. Paul wrote that his mind/soul often wanted to do what was good, but his body wanted to do what was bad (Romans 7:19).

Scripture also honors the body as a part of God’s creation and as a vessel for worship. This study looks at how we often mistreat the gift of the body, and how we can use our bodies to be good stewards of God’s creation. The sessions in this study require space for movement and rest. Participants should gather in a place where there is plenty of room to move about safely and where they will not be distracted or intruded on. Comfortable clothes are also recommended (sweatshirt and pants, shorts, whatever the participants feel comfortable moving in). Make sure to look over the sessions to see what materials will be needed.

Session 2 invites the group to participate in an Agape Feast. Be sure to read the introduction and gather the food you would like to share in this feast. Fresh fruits, breads, and juice are recommended. You may want to discuss as a group the types of food you would like. Also keep in mind food allergies when preparing any session that involves food. We also recommend that you have no more food than is necessary. As good stewards of food, we do not want any to go to waste. One suggestion is to have each person bring enough for himself or herself. Have everyone place the food on the table or wherever you will set up the feast, and have everyone share.

1. www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Pythagorus

Session 4 discusses sleep. You may want to have fun with this session and invite everyone to wear “pajamas” that day.

Session 6 involves percussion instruments, and tambourines are optional in Session 3. Many of the instruments can be found in church nurseries and preschool classes. Check those places before looking elsewhere.

Remember that issues of body image can be very personal and that scars around body image can run very deep. Although humor is also a gift of God (expressed by the body!), it is important to be sensitive to the needs of others. If some participants feel uncomfortable about some of the exercises and conversations, allow them the space to retreat until they feel they can participate again.

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God's Gift of Stewardship

Scripture: Genesis 1:26–31; Mark 12:28b–31; 1 Corinthians 6:19–20

Introduction

In the beginning, God gave us bodies. God also gave us dominion over, or stewardship of, “everything that creeps on the earth” (Genesis 1:30), including ourselves. We express our stewardship in everything we say and do. We even express it in worship, when we present our tithes and offerings. Stewardship is worship because it is one of the ways we express our love for God and for God’s creation. Stewardship of, or care of, our bodies is a form of worship. It is an expression of our relationship with God, with each other, and with ourselves.

Our bodies are perhaps the finest expression of God’s creativity. In fact, when God came to earth, God came in a human body. Genesis tells us that God created humankind in the image of God (1:27). Somehow, our bodies reflect something about who God is. Yet our bodies are not God, and we do not worship them. Scripture tells us that our bodies are God’s temples (1 Corinthians 6:19).

In this session, we will explore God’s gift of our bodies and God’s gift of the stewardship of our bodies. We will see that everything we have, including our bodies, is a gift from God. We will examine the variety of messages we receive about our bodies from the media, from our families, and from the church, historically and in the present. We will contrast these messages with the very different message that we receive when we understand our bodies as belonging to God.

Biblical Reflection

Genesis 1:26–31

Although the book of Genesis is not a scientific account of how our world came about, it is an ancient account of our relationship with God. The seven days of creation are not a literal account of the development of our world, but they are a symbolic representation of the magnificence of our Creator, and of a profound love. The claim that on the sixth day God created humankind in God’s own image or likeness makes a profound statement about who we are. Although we

do not literally look like God, we are in relationship with God unlike any other creature. Likewise, although we are not God, we do possess creative abilities. So we are like God in our capacity for relationship and in our activities, especially our creative ones.

Further, we have been given an ethic of care that defines us and tells us about the nature of God. In giving us dominion (authority) over every living thing that moves upon the earth, God has not given us the arbitrary power of consumption or destruction, but rather a responsibility of a sustaining stewardship, or responsible use. Our dominion is limited by an ethic of care, marked by benevolence and peace.

Finally, God has given us the nurturing gift of a blessing. God has touched us in a way that communicates a part of God to us. God's blessing declared us and our bodies as good—very good, in fact. Whatever self-esteem about our bodies we may lack, God holds out our bodies to us as a gift, freely given.

Mark 12:28b–31

Often called the Greatest Commandment, this passage defines the Christian life. All that we do and say and our stewardship of God's gifts to us are governed by these two commandments. Loving God first provides the motive or attitude from which we act. We do not worship or idolize anything other than God. If our concern for something (in this case our bodies or our selves) exceeds our love for God, we have mistakenly made an idol of our bodies.

Similarly, loving our neighbor as ourselves provides a balancing point for our intentions and activities. If we disregard the needs of our neighbor when we care for our selves, we have elevated our selves above our neighbor, becoming our neighbor's master, and making our neighbor into a servant. Likewise, if we disregard our own needs when we care for our neighbor, we elevate our neighbor, replacing God with our neighbor.

This passage helps us balance our attitudes toward our bodies. If we become too focused upon our bodies, we become hedonists (hedonism is the belief that pleasure or happiness is the sole or chief good in life) and replace God with our bodies. If we ignore the needs of our bodies, either out of devotion to God or to our neighbor or for some other lack or need, we mortify our bodies. We do not serve God, our neighbor, or ourselves, but actually deny God's love for us, God's creation of us, God's care and blessing of us.

1 Corinthians 6:19–20

Because God gave us our bodies, and made us caretakers of our bodies, we care for them as God would care for them, blessing them and viewing them as good, very good. By virtue of our baptisms, our bodies take on yet another characteristic. Not only are our bodies good, they also represent Christ's body on earth. In fact, our bodies house God, the Holy Spirit. We care for our bodies as part of what sustains our relationship with God. When we offer our bodies an ethic of care, we make an offering to God, as surely as we make an offering to God when we pray or worship, study or tithe.

Preparation

Those gathered will

- Begin to see their bodies as a part of God's creation, a gift from God.
- Begin to see their bodies as God sees them: very good!
- Begin to see the care that they offer to their bodies as part of their relationship with or devotion to God.



Reflection Questions

- How do you view your body?
- How does “the world” view your body?
- How did your parents or grandparents view their bodies?
- How does God view your body?
- What difference does it make that God dwells in your body?
- How does the idea that self-care is part of your devotion of or offering to God change your relationship with your body? Does it allow you to give self-care a greater priority in your life?

Resources Needed

- Bibles
- Skeleton or anatomy charts or library books about anatomy
- Old magazines
- Newsprint
- Name tags
- Markers
- Candle
- Lighter
- Chime (*optional*)

Gathering

As the participants gather, invite them to make two nametags. One nametag is for their name. The other nametag should read, “MY BODY.” Invite them to draw a symbol on their “body” nametag. This could be a symbol of how they see their bodies, what they like best about their bodies, or even what they like least. Invite the participants to examine the anatomy charts or books or the skeleton. When everyone has arrived, invite the participants to sit down. Light a candle or sound a pleasant chime. Invite them to take three deep breaths, and then open with the following prayer:

Gracious God, we give you thanks for the gift of our bodies. Be with us as we learn about your gift of stewardship and about how we can come into deeper relationship with you. We pray for all who are uncomfortable with or suffering in their bodies or in any other way. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

Pass out old magazines. Invite the participants to quickly skim the magazines for advertisements or articles that have pictures or messages about the human body. This should take about thirty seconds, but can take longer if the group seems interested in the exercise. Some may choose more than one message or picture. Challenge those who finish before others to find messages or pictures that conflict with their first selections. Allow the participants to keep the magazines until this exercise has concluded.

When the group has collected several examples, go around the circle and describe what messages our culture presents through these examples. List each cultural message, verbatim, on a piece of newsprint. If someone from the group adds a comment, write it on the newsprint also. As you begin your list, the participants may wish to find images, articles, or advertisements that send additional messages. When you begin to repeat messages or “shoulds” about the body, draw the exercise to a close and ask someone to collect the magazines. At the top of the newsprint, label the list of attitudes: “Culture.”

Exploring the Word

Pass out enough Bibles so that every two participants share a Bible. Ask them to find Genesis 1:26–31. Invite someone to read the passage out loud. What are the messages about the human body in this passage? List these messages on another piece of newsprint. (You will

use both pieces of newsprint throughout the Living the Word section.) Use the following questions to help unpack the Scripture, and write responses on the newsprint.

- What might it mean to be created in the image of God?
- What does it mean for us and for our bodies to have God’s blessing?
- What does it mean for God to see that our bodies are very good?
- What does it mean to profess that God created our bodies?



Although we know that we are scientifically formed according to the laws of biology, what message does the Bible send to us about the relationship between God and our bodies, when it says that God created our bodies, and that our bodies are very good? What does it mean to be a creature? A *Homo sapiens*? A mammal? An animal?

Ask a volunteer to read verses 26b and 28b. What do they think it means to have dominion over every living thing that moves upon the earth?

Ask another participant to read verses 29 and 30. How do these verses limit the dominion human beings possess? Because verses 29 and 30 envision a nonviolent food supply, biblical scholars have viewed verses 29 and 30 as limiting the “power” of humankind over the earth to nonviolent caretaking. Explain that the word *dominion* has also been translated as “stewardship.”

Invite the participants to define stewardship. Ask: What does it mean to have stewardship over your own living, moving human body? (*Note:* A Reformed view of this Scripture does not suggest that we all become vegetarians! But it does suggest a peaceful and benevolent dominion.)

Invite the participants to turn to Mark 12:28b–31. Ask someone to read the passage out loud and discuss the following questions.

- Why is this passage called the Great Commandment?
- What two messages are found in this passage?
- What does the first commandment tell us about our relationship with our bodies?
- What does the second commandment tell us about our relationship with our bodies and with our neighbor?

List on the newsprint the messages the biblical passage gives us about our bodies.

Invite the participants to turn to 1 Corinthians 6:19–20. Ask someone to read that passage out loud. Reflect upon what you know about your baptisms and of the baptisms of people you know or remember. This passage tells us something new about our baptized bodies. What are the messages in these passages about baptized bodies? Write the responses on the newsprint. At the top of the newsprint label this list “Bible.”

Living the Word

Compare the “Culture” and the “Bible” newsprint lists. Discuss the following questions:

- What do the lists have in common?
- How are they different?
- Which list do you carry around in your head or act upon?
- Which list do you want to carry around in your head?
- Which list do you want to act upon?
- Will knowing that God created your body change your choices about how you think about or care for your body?
- What does it mean to be one of God’s creatures?
- Does knowing that God thinks your body is very good change how you feel about your body?
- What difference does it make to your understanding of your body to remember that God came to dwell on earth in Jesus of Nazareth?
- How does your image of your own body change when you remember that your baptized body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, which God dwells in you?



Some theologians say that stewardship is everything you do or say, after you say, “I believe.” How are you a good steward of your body? Worship is our response to God and to God’s gifts. When we acknowledge God’s gifts to us, we respond to those gifts with our offerings, evidence of our stewardship. How is stewardship part of our worship of God? When we present our offerings in worship, we give evidence of our stewardship. When we take care of our bodies, we present evidence of our stewardship. Being a good steward is one of the ways that we worship God. When we take care of our bodies, we are making an offering to God. Can care for our bodies be a form of prayer?

Write in your calendar one good thing you do for your body each day during the next week. It can be as simple as taking a walk or as complex as learning more about the human physiology of a particular body part.

Closing

Stand and form a circle by holding hands. Invite everyone to move toward one another in the circle and then to back away, while still holding hands. Invite them to do this again and again as a simple dance.

Tell the group to repeat after the leader in each of the following statements. As they repeat what you say, ask everyone to move toward the center, and then back out. Wait until everyone has moved out from the center before saying the next statement.

- I have a body.
- God created my body.
- My body is the image of God.
- When I care for my body ...
- I worship God.
- I love God.
- I love my neighbor.
- I love my body.
- God, the Holy Spirit, lives in my body.
- God said my body is good.
- Amen!

Hugs and shouting “Hurray” are optional!

More Options

Become aware of any negative self-talk you have regarding your body. Do those messages come from the Bible or from advertisements? Try to recognize how our culture idolizes the body.

You may wish to write down your reflections about your body in a journal. Begin to think about your body as belonging to God, and yourself as the stewards of this body. We honor God when we honor our bodies.

These two books might interest anyone who would like to enter into a conscious relationship with his or her body and its Creator:

Anatomy Coloring Book by Wynn Kapit;

Bodystories: A Guide to Experiential Anatomy by Andrea Olsen.

For those looking for a more detailed development of the theology of self-care, I suggest *Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice* by Stephanie Paulsell.