

More and More

When we gather for bible study each week, we have a practice of reading the text from different translations. This past week, we chuckled when we read verse 16 from *The Message* translation: “So we’re not giving up. How could we! Even though on the outside it often looks like things are falling apart on us...” With each new twinge and creak, I often declare that I am falling apart in my old age. So, it’s not a stretch for me or for many of us to relate to Paul’s words. The older we are allowed to grow and the more our bodies remind us that we are growing older, the more likely we are to agree that things are falling apart on us, too, leading us to long for a body that works like it used to, a body that works like we wish it would.

Paul is ever mindful of the strain his body is under in following Christ’s call to share the gospel and plant new communities of faith in the face of tremendous persecution. Scholars believe that Paul’s writings date from the 50s, years before the Second Temple is destroyed around the year 70. That said he knows deep in his core what it meant for the First Temple to be destroyed. He knows what the destruction of Jerusalem and the resulting decades of exile meant for the people of God. And he knows the toll that the occupation and oppression of Roman forces is taking on his siblings in Jerusalem in real time. We are not defined or contained by our buildings, nor are we defined or contained by our bodies. Yet we are creatures shaped by how we move through the world and where we find shelter, safety, and hope. What happens to our bodies and to our buildings has an impact on us. We are not our bodies and yet how we live and move in the world is an essential part of who we are. We cannot separate our bodies from our spirits or our minds. We are fearfully and wonderfully made, body, mind, heart, soul, and spirit all wrapped up together.

The ads and the posts seem to pop up earlier and earlier every year, insisting that we need to start working on our summer bodies or our beach bodies, absurdly declaring that we need to look a certain way in order to enjoy warmer weather, splash in a pool, or savor a fresh tomato. These summer body posts are an extension of fitspiration posts that show up year-round. While social media has been with us for decades, we

still struggle to move beyond the rhetoric about and images of bodies that seek to convince us that there is such a thing as a perfect body and that we too can have that body—if we just eat the one thing or don't eat the other thing or exercise just the right way. Professor Lauren Stutts notes that “more than 72 million Instagram posts are tagged as #fitspo,” meaning that it is nearly impossible for young people or anyone else to scroll without seeing carefully toned and outfitted bodies.¹ And the impact can be devastating:

Research, including by Stutts, has tied social media image consumption to body image concerns. Her previous research also has shown that more than 60% of women and more than half of men reported weight or shape concerns or disordered eating, or all of those, at the end of their first year of college... The eye-popping part of the most recent paper published in the journal *Eating Behaviors* by Stutts and her students, [Kimaya] Gracias and Isabella Pilot...was the power of incidental exposure to images. They divided 234 female college students into three groups based on their self-reporting of fitspiration exposure: those who neither view nor post fitspiration, those who see it unintentionally, and those who intentionally view or post.

Self-reported weight or shape concerns and disordered eating behaviors were worse among the two groups who viewed fitspiration compared to those who did not, but there was not a difference between those who sought out those images and those who unintentionally saw them.

‘Small, unintentional exposures,’ Gracias said, ‘not just following a trend on Instagram, have a real impact.’²

So just stumbling across one of these accounts had the same negative impact as seeking them out intentionally. Thankfully, Stutts and her students found ways to counter the damaging messages students encountered and internalized. One strategy of encouraging users to seek out travel images or fitness accounts belonging to people of different body types and sizes helped offset negative feelings:

¹ <https://www.davidson.edu/news/2024/06/03/fitspiration-social-media-posts-affect-body-image-heres-what-do-about-it>

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A second strategy is changing how an Instagram user interacts with the content. In a study Stutts published with Pilot, they had participants write briefly about values or traits that are important to them, such as relationships or empathy, before or after they viewed fitspiration. Their research...showed the body dissatisfaction of participants who wrote about values or traits remained the same as before exposure to fitspiration. The intervention provided a buffer because a comparison group who viewed fitspiration but did not write about values or traits had increased body dissatisfaction.³

So the simple act of pausing to remember and intentionally reflect on what the students value and believe helped temper the damaging impact of the images they were fed in their feeds.

Paul is not on Instagram. And heaven knows Paul would never make it on Twitter or X—144 characters would be an impossible limit for him to adhere to. There are, however, others who work their way into our algorithms on social media as well as media of all kinds. These voices proclaim that the church is falling apart, along with the world. We don't look like we did in our golden years. We're not as pretty or popular as we once were, they insist. And they offer any number of hacks or quick fixes to help us get back there, back to some picture-perfect church body without creaks or cracks or blemishes or battle scars.

That, dear ones, is not church. It never has been church. The church at its most faithful has always been a gathering of God's beloved of every age, ability, gender, and nationality. The church at its most faithful has always wrestled with and debated how best to embody the gospel of Jesus in a divided world. The church at its most faithful has always been aware of its humanity and the ways we do not always live up to our calling as the Body of Christ. And the church at its most faithful has always been deeply grateful for God's unfailing grace and love and Christ's willingness to give himself up for us "while we were yet sinners," as Paul proclaims in his letter to the Romans. As Paul seeks to encourage the Corinthians, he lifts up a different image of the church, a counter understanding of the Body of Christ. It's not about his celebrity status. It is about their shared

³ <https://www.davidson.edu/news/2024/06/03/fitspiration-social-media-posts-affect-body-image-heres-what-do-about-it>

belonging in the Body of Christ. He declares that all that he speaks and does is an offering for the Corinthians' sake, "so that grace, when it has extended to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God."⁴ Or, in the words of *The Message*: "more and more grace, more and more people, more and more praise!"⁵ The act of extending more and more of God's grace to more and more people, THAT is the mark of church at her faithful best. Not perfection. Not shaping herself into the prettiest, the most put-together, the fittest, the most polished, or the strongest. More and more grace, pointing more and more of God's beloved children not to our greatness but to God's graciousness, that is the ministry we share in Jesus Christ. The more we encounter God's grace and the more we point to that grace, the more grateful we and others are AND the less inclined we will be to fall for the false gospel of exclusion, perfection, fear, and division. It is this work and witness to God's grace in Jesus Christ that leads us not to lose heart, Paul insists. Again, it is not about willing ourselves into being strong or faithful or brave. Our not losing heart, our hanging onto hope and faith and goodness and love is directly tied to our basking in God's grace, more and more grace for more and more people.

As we make our way through God's beloved embattled world and navigate all the voices shouting about all the ways we and others fall short of someone else's definition of what it is to be beautiful, to be loved, to be good, to be successful, to be fit, to be faithful, let us remember who and whose we are first, last, and always. Let us steep ourselves again and again in the grace that God pours out on us and upon all without fail, grace that is poured out not because we are perfect but because we are loved beyond measure. And let us find the courage to speak a different word to a world hungry for grace and offer up a different image to a world starving for good news. And let us not lose heart, in the name of the one who claims us as his own and shapes us into his own Body for the sake of God's beloved world and to the glory of God and God alone.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

⁴ 2 Corinthians 4:15

⁵ 2 Corinthians 4:15, *The Message*