

The Will to Pill¹
Psalm 32
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St. John United Methodist Church
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How is your spiritual health today? It's a question our culture doesn't want to ask. We're really into angels, and the supernatural, but our own spiritual health? Next subject.

We *are*, however, quite interested in our *physical* health. Witness the pharmaceutical culture we live in. We can't turn on the TV without discovering that there's a new syndrome or disease out there. You've seen all those ads featuring happy people walking in the woods, mountain biking, sitting in bathtubs and throwing footballs through tires because they took a pill that made it all possible. Want to lose weight, get more sleep, get stronger, or deal with an embarrassing social disease? Just ask your doctor, pop the pill, and relax.

A story is told of two old men talking on a front porch. One man says, "Say, you must try this memory pill I'm taking. I remember everything. It's amazing, this pill." The other man says, "Sounds wonderful. What is the name of the pill?" The first man says, "The name of the pill ... Let's see ... Hmmm, what is the name of the flower ... with the thorns? It's red ... You give it on Valentine's Day." The other man says, "A rose?" The first man says, "Yes, that's right!" Then, calling for his wife, he says, "Rose, what is the name of that pill?"

There is a web site where you can actually purchase pills for some really wacky purposes. You can buy Road Rage pills. The directions tell you to take two before a commute, turn on the radio, and let every driver cut in front of you cheerfully! Another bottle of pills will cure your bad hair days. The subtitle reads, "Never wear a wig again." Another pill is for Shop-oholics. It's no joke, you're broke! There's one called Baditude that parents can sneak into their teenager's pizza, Cheapskate Capsules which will make you spend more money, and a pill that will compensate for drinking large amounts of beer called, Beer Belly Busters.²

Now that I have poked fun at pills, I must speak about the positive differences pharmaceuticals have made in the quality of life for people. I have had a hand tremor since I was a teenager that has worsened over the years. If it wasn't for the pills I take every day I couldn't sign my name or hold up the communion cup without spilling it.

But as good as many of these pills are, they're not strong enough to do the job alone. Taking cholesterol medication while continuing to eat bacon fried in lard, for example, probably negates any good benefit the drug offers. One pill just won't do it.

But that doesn't stop people from relying on them. Of all the pharmaceutical ads popping up everywhere, the ones targeting America's rapidly expanding waistline seem to get the most response. After all, if you could really lose 10 pounds while still sitting on the couch eating cheese puffs, wouldn't you want to make that happen? Every year brings new diets or a new remedy that claims we can have it all and still look good, too.

¹ Sermon idea from Homiletics.com.

² <http://www.prankplace.com/crazycures1.asp?id=31>. Retrieved Feb. 5, 2008.

One of the bigger pharmaceutical splashes this past summer was the advent of a new diet pill called “Alli” which is the first over-the-counter weight-loss pill to have full FDA approval. Alli claims to be an anti-obesity pill that “eats fat” by absorbing up to a quarter of the fat the user eats. Pudgy Americans, looking for the ultimate solution to a lifetime of overeating, have been buying up this new wonder pill despite its relatively high cost of about \$50 for a 20-day supply (or, as Alli’s Web site says, “roughly what one might expect to pay for a bag of chips and a can of soda every day — the equivalent of an afternoon snack.”)

In other words, put down the chips and you can afford to pop the pill. But that raises an interesting question. If I have the willpower to put down the chips in the first place, do I really need the pill? The bottom line is that Alli only works effectively if you eat a healthy diet and exercise regularly — stuff you should have been doing in the first place. Truth is that most people don’t need the pill, they just need the will to get out and do what’s right for their bodies.

There are obvious parallels between physical health and spiritual health. When it comes to our spiritual health the truth is that most people don’t need a pill, they just need the will to get out and do what’s right for their souls. There’s no magic pill out there that can curb the human appetite for self-indulgence and no pharmaceutical miracle that will heal a sin-sick soul. For that we need a prescription from the Scriptures, a spiritual diet and exercise plan designed to help us look and feel healthier in spirit.

Psalms 32 speaks of spiritual health and vitality as being the result of a comprehensive program of confession, repentance and forgiveness. The psalm begins by defining spiritual health: “Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered” and those “in whose spirit there is no deceit” (vv. 1-2). People become fit and trim in spirit when they are unburdened from the weight of guilt that sin has packed on. Cutting that dead spiritual weight, according to the psalmist, begins when we get real about our situation. Sin, like junk food bingeing, often happens in secret. We tend to gorge ourselves when no one else is looking, but the crumbs on our shirts and spirits betray us. The psalmist realized that the “silence” of secret sin had affected him spiritually and physically. The human tendency is to cover up the smelly side effects of our sin by any means, no matter how bizarre or destructive to ourselves or those around us. God isn’t fooled, however. The psalmist felt the “heavy” hand of God’s conviction which sapped his “strength” for carrying the charade on any further (vv. 3-4).

The cure for sin, however, isn’t a one-shot personal power pill but a daily workout regimen. The psalmist lays out a three-pronged sin-reduction program. Call it the “CPI” diet: confession, prayer and instruction.

Confession: The psalmist laid out his sin before God, refusing to “hide” it any longer. No pill here, just a will to “confess my transgressions to the LORD” (v. 5). People with addictions going through 12-step programs know that the first step toward healing is acknowledging that they have a problem, be it with alcohol, drugs, food or anything else. We have to realize along with them, though, that the first step is often the hardest. Like the first day you run on the treadmill or lift those weights, confession can result in some personal pain as we have to face what we’ve done or failed to do and the resulting debilitating effects. If we’re willing to go there, however, we immediately find

that we have a workout partner, a real “ally” in God. When we confess our sins, God is “faithful and just” and forgives those sins, coming alongside us to begin the healing process (1 John 1:9). The heavy weight of guilt melts away when we sign up for God’s program of love and forgiveness.

Prayer: Think of prayer as the ongoing daily discipline that keeps the fat of sin from coming back. In the ancient world, the sea and represented evil and chaos. The psalmist rejoices that God holds back the evil from washing over our souls when we choose to spend time with God in prayer. It is in prayer that we find a “hiding place” in God and hear God’s “glad cries of deliverance” (v. 7). To put it another way, prayer is a way for us to hear God cheering us on to a new way of life!

Instruction: The voice of the psalm seems to switch over to God in verse 8. Like a personal trainer, God will “instruct,” “teach,” and “counsel” God’s people toward a healthy spiritual lifestyle. God’s instruction requires an obedient response, however. The fact that the rate of obesity in the United States has grown despite an accompanying rise in diet pills and books, exercise videos and other fitness-related products tells us something about human nature. We know what’s good for us, but we’re often too stubborn or set in our ways to actually do it. God calls people to respond willingly to God’s direction and not act like a “horse or mule” that has to be “curbed with bit and bridle” (v. 9).

Today is the first Sunday in Lent, a 40-day period of spiritual examination and preparation leading to Easter. Why should we bother with Lent? Because it allows for us, a form of spiritual practice. Musicians understand this, at least the good ones. No musician will remain a good musician long without regular practice. It is a discipline, this practice that enables freedom; not a freedom that avoids discipline. Horowitz, the great pianist said, “If I skip practice one day, I know it. If I skip practice two days, the critics know it. And if I skip practice three days, everybody knows it.”

Lent is Christian practice time. It is spring training for the Christian who wants to stay in shape, or who wants to get into shape. Such spiritual health and the means to it is not a luxury. It is a necessity. No one is so well off spiritually that he or she can afford to skip Lent. And no one is so bad off spiritually that Lent can’t be helpful.³

³—Peter Gomes, “Confessions and consequences,” in *Pulpit Digest*, January/February 1994, 23-29.